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MR. GEORGE AND OTHER ODD PERSONS

by Stephen Grendon

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STEPHEN GRENDON

*Mr. George
and Other Odd Persons*

August William Derleth



ARKHAM HOUSE

Sauk City, Wisconsin

1963

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INTRODUCTION

The tales in this book were written all in one month twenty years ago specifically to swell the log of *Weird Tales*. Since that estimable and lamented magazine already had enough stories by August Derleth in its files, the byline of Stephen Grendon was used—which was not really a foolproof disguise for there were among the readers of *Weird Tales* some few who were familiar with my autobiographical novel, *Evening in Spring*, first published in 1941, and recognized the name of the narrator in that novel as the author of the stories by Stephen Grendon.

Moreover, these stories were conceived and set down at a time when I was working at the revision of my long novel, *The Shield of the Valiant*, which was then in first place on my schedule, so that it was often late at night—never earlier than nine o'clock, and on, frequently, to two o'clock in the morning—before I could begin the daily story. Further, by that time of the evening, my studio was commonly filled with visitors—often young people out to study—by which I mean that they sought answers to their questions about the morrow's assignments not from the *Britannica* on the shelves but from the author at the desk—so, in effect, these narratives were written under conditions in which the average writer could not have begun to function. And finally, all these stories appear here as they were first written down—for time did not permit revision and re-typing in those hectic days; each story was put down on paper ready for the printer, and went off next day in the mail.

Nevertheless, and perhaps because of the vicissitudes of their creation, I have come to think many of them among the best macabre tales I have written. I have not often achieved the peculiar menace and yes, charm, of *Mr. George*, or the delightful cold grue of *Mrs.*

Manifold—which is not to deprecate the other stories in this collection. I hope that readers of these tales will not find it too difficult to agree.

—AUGUST DERLETH

Sauk City, Wisconsin

27 May 1963

MR. GEORGE AND OTHER ODD PERSONS

Mr. George

Now that the sunlight of late afternoon slanted across the lawn, Priscilla took the flowers she had gathered and tied a little blue ribbon around them. She attached the note she had written, clutched the bouquet tightly to her, and tiptoed to the door of her room. She opened it. Voices came up the stairs. But *they* were out in back, and would not hear her leaving the house. If they saw her come back, that would make no difference. She closed the door behind her and marched her sturdy five-year-old self down the carpeted stairs to the front door and outside.

The street-car conductor recognized her. He bent his moustached face above her and asked, "All alone, Miss Priscilla?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's going on for dark, too. Are you off far?"

"Oh, no. I'm going to see Mr. George."

He looked unhappy. His smile was pale, thin. He said no more.

The street-car clanged on its way. Priscilla knew that the conductor would tell her just where to get off, but just the same she counted the blocks—the next but one, where Renshaws lived; the one after that, which was Burtons'; the one of vacant lots; and then at last, after three blocks in which no one she knew lived—seven of them in all—the conductor called in that this was her stop.

"Yes, sir. I know. Thank you," she said.

She smiled at him and got off.

He looked after her, troubled; he shook his head. "And what's to become of her with all those vultures around her?" he asked of the mote-ridden air.

All along the way, Priscilla had been a little apprehensive about the big iron gate; but, since it was not yet six o'clock, it stood open. She passed through the open gate and went directly to Mr. George's place. There was nothing to put the flowers in; so she left them there, right where Mr. George would be sure to see them. She was not quite sure about Mr. George. Of late, many things had puzzled her. She did not understand about Mr. George, nor why he had gone away and left her alone with her mother's cousins, who, she knew with the unerring instinct of a child, did not love her the way Mr. George had loved her, or her mother before him, gone, too.

She pulled out the note and fixed it in such a way that he would be sure to see it. Going away, she looked back several times to see whether he had come; but the flowers lay there undisturbed with the whiteness of the note-paper standing out. The flowers were sweet rocket, forget-me-nots, and roses—old-fashioned flowers, the kind Mr. George liked. But Mr. George did not come; he was not in sight when she got to the gate; so, with one last lingering look, she went out into the street and down to the corner to wait for the street-car, already beginning to wonder whether *they* had missed her.

But, no, they had not. They were still talking when she slipped into the house, though one of them was in the dining-room now, and they were all raising their voices a little—not enough to be audible much beyond the front hall. She stood soundless, listening. Though the two women and the man, their brother, were her mother's cousins, Priscilla thought of them as

her aunts and uncle. The women were in the kitchen, and Uncle Laban in the dining-room.

Uncle Laban was saying, "The trouble with you, Virginia, is that you have no sense of refinement, no tact. It's just the money you want, and you don't care how you get it."

"It's just *her* who stands between us. You know it as well as I."

"Now that George is gone," said Laban.

"Yes," said Virginia.

There was a nervous titter from Adelaide.

"I often wonder just what was the relation between them?" resumed Virginia. "Were they lovers?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Oh, it does," put in Addie. "If we could prove perhaps that *she* is his child . . ."

Laban made an impatient clucking sound. "Irrelevant and immaterial. Cissie's will is clear, and it makes no difference whether Priscilla is George's or Henry's or even whether she wasn't Cissie's. The will set forth that George was to stay here in Cissie's house until he wished to go . . ."

"Or died," interposed Virginia.

"Don't be unpleasant," said Laban shortly. "And the house, the grounds, and all the money—"

"Three hundred thousand dollars!" sighed Adelaide.

"—belongs to Priscilla."

"You leave out the most important part," said Virginia. "After Priscilla, we come."

"Say, rather, we are here."

"Oh, yes," said Adelaide bitterly, "as we have always been here. On someone's bounty."

"What do you care about that?" asked Laban pettishly. "We have the run of the house—and almost of her bank account."

"I want it openly, above-board," said Virginia.

"Oh, you are descending to comedy," said Laban. "But I know you're up to something—letting the servants go one by one."

"They were Cissie's—not mine."

"You haven't replaced any of them."

"No. I'll think about that. Have you got that table done?"

"Yes."

"Go and call her."

Priscilla fled noiselessly up the stairs, so that she would be ready when Uncle Laban called.

On the night side of dusk, Canby, who was on his beat, saw something white fluttering beyond the gate. In the course of routine duty he went in to see what it was. He detached the note, flashed his light around to get such details as might be necessary, and in due course turned the note in at precinct headquarters.

The captain read it.

"Dear Mr. George, please come back. We want you to live with us again. We have plenty of room. You just take the street-car and go straight east. The house is just like you left it, only now more roses are in bloom."

"No signature?"

"None. It was just there on the grave, with some flowers. I left the flowers. Grave of a man named George Newell. Died about a month ago. Fifty-one years old."

"Looks like a kid's printing. Give it to Orlo Ward—that's the kind of thing he wants for *The New Yorker*."

The old clock in the hall, which had been grandfather Dedman's, talked all night. Mr. George said that her mother remembered how it talked. It used to say "Cis-sie, Cis-sie, Cis-sie, Go-to sleep-now, Cis-sie!" over and over until she went to sleep. Now

Priscilla thought it talked to her in the same way. But Priscilla was not sleepy. She lay listening to all the sounds the old house made. She lay mourning her lot, now that the cook—the last one she liked—had been sent away, and the rest of them in the house disliking her. She could tell by the way they looked at her, by the way they talked to her; and there was the feeling she had. If only Mr. George would come back! Nothing had been the way it had always been after her mother went away since the day Mr. George complained he wasn't feeling well and later called her to his bed and said, "Be a good girl now, Priscilla. And remember, if anything goes wrong, go to Laura."—Laura being something to Mr. George as she had been to her mother. But not, like the Lecketts, blood-relative.

The murmur of voices whispered down the hall.

Virginia Leckett was braiding her hair in her brother's room. Laban was already abed.

"And if something did happen to her, there couldn't be any question about our inheriting, could there?" she was asking.

"That's the tenth time you've asked that, I'll swear," he said.

"Could there?" she insisted.

"How? There aren't any other relatives."

"That's what I thought."

"Anyway, she's as healthy as a cow."

"Oh, things could happen."

"What things?"

"You never can tell, Laban."

"You give me the creeps, Virginia."

"Look at the way George went."

"Well, you can't expect Priscilla to develop heart trouble."

"That's what the doctor *said*."

"That's what he believed, also."

"That could be seen to. There are things that bring on heart attacks."

"You'd better not talk that way, Virginia."

"No?"

"No!"

"Just the same," she went on, talking more rapidly, "if something happened to Priscilla—just think, three hundred thousand dollars! Laban—think what you could do with your share! And I! Why, I could go to Europe."

"But you never would. Why don't you stop torturing yourself about that money? It's out of your reach."

"Is it?"

"You'd better go to your room."

Virginia's footsteps went down the hall, pausing at the door of Priscilla's room. Don't let her come in, God, asked Priscilla with supreme confidence. Virginia went on down the hall, and the hum of voices came distantly from Adelaide's room. It had been this way many nights since Mr. George went away. Sometimes Priscilla would think that she hated Aunt Virginia the most; but then she would remember mama telling her never to hate anyone because hate hurts the hater more than the hated—or something like that. Just the same, Priscilla did not trust Aunt Virginia. She did not trust Aunt Adelaide or Uncle Laban, either, but she mistrusted Aunt Virginia the most. She could not understand what mama meant when she used to say to Mr. George, "I pity them. They are so narrow, so provincial. When they had money they could have gone to Paris, to Vienna—but no, they had to invest it in shaky stock just to get more, and lost it all. Poor things!"

The clock said, "Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Go-to sleep-now, Pris-sie."

"I'm not sleepy," said Priscilla into the darkness.

The house settled, groaning and creaking. A faucet dripped somewhere, and in the wind outside a limb of the cedar at the northwest corner of the house rapped from time to time against the wall. The clock went on talking, with its loud *tick-tock, tick-tock tick-tock*. And outside the street-cars clanged past, ever fewer and fewer of them, as the night deepened. Priscilla lay thinking, dreaming almost, of mama and Mr. George, and of how it had been only a year ago, when they had been where the ocean was, and she had played all day long in the sand, while mama's cough got worse and worse, and Mr. George grew sad and quiet, and the wind blew, it seemed, colder and colder and blew them at last right back here to the house on Elm Street where mama had been born. It seemed a long, long time ago, ever so long. Time seemed to stretch out into endless dimensions on every side of her, and she felt lost, lost from mama and Mr. George, and the sandy beach and all the trains, the strange little coaches of those places far over the ocean, and the ships, and . . .

But now she grew drowsy, and someone came in through the door and bent over her and whispered, "Go to sleep now, Priscilla."

"All right, Mr. George," she said.

In the morning Priscilla, who was up with the sun, took Celine—the oldest of her dolls, and her favorite, for it had come from Arles, bought by mama and Mr. George on a lovely holiday from Paris—and went to play in the tea-house at the end of the garden, sitting in the cool shade of the birch trees leaning over. Long before anyone else in the house was out of bed, Priscilla reached her haven with Celine. She was in the habit of carrying on long conversations with Celine, who was pert and quaint at

the same time, looking foreign and strange, and, in the circumstances, not too voluble, always saying just the right things.

This morning she was set up in her usual place across from Priscilla, and Priscilla arranged the tea-things as she talked. Did Celine have a good night's rest, or were her legs crossed under her again? Would Celine like sugar or lemon or both in her tea, or did Celine prefer to drink it in the proper manner, without anything? The birds sang, for the tree-girt garden was a haven in the midst of the city, and seven blocks was a good flying distance to the trees of the cemetery; so they flew back and forth all day long, and made intimate noises in the shrubbery around the tea-house.

Celine made the appropriate answers.

But there was something strange about her this morning, and presently Priscilla began to look at her as if with new eyes. It seemed to her that Celine was trying very hard to say something to her—something really original, that did not come from Priscilla first. "Take care," she seemed to say. "Watch out."

Priscilla looked around her in momentary alarm, so real did Celine's voice seem. But there was no one there.

"Watch out for whom?" she asked in a whisper.

"For *them*!" said Celine. But what an odd voice for a doll's: thought Priscilla.

Then she looked very covertly around her on all sides of the tea-house. She knew that voice! She did, indeed. It was Mr. George's—and it was just like him to pretend it was Celine's.

She clapped her hands and cried out gaily, "Come out, come out, wherever you are, Mr. George."

No one came.

"Please, Mr. George."

A mourning dove cooed.

"Don't tease me."

No answer.

She looked at Celine, but the doll was as bland as ever. She looked away, over her shoulder.

"Watch out," said Celine in Mr. George's voice.

She whirled, looking this way and that. "I'll find you," she cried out. "I will, I will!" She darted into the bushes, peering this way and that, with such violence that the birds were still, save for a blue jay who sent out warning cries about her intrusion to every part of the garden.

"Whatever is that child doing?" inquired Adelaide from the window.

"What?" asked Virginia, hooking herself into her old-fashioned dress before the mirror.

"Why, running around and around the tea-house. She seems to be looking for something. Or someone."

"Children have imaginary playmates."

"It's crazy, Ginny. Now, I wonder!"

Virginia looked at her. Sometimes that too-large head on that short, thin body produced an idea of merit, from Virginia's point of view. "What is it now, Addie?"

Adelaide looked at her out of narrowed eyes. "Do you suppose it might be possible to have her declared—well, not insane, exactly—but . . ."

"Oh, no, that would never do. There are so many other ways. A slow poison, for instance."

"Don't be crude, Virginia," said Laban from the threshold. "For God's sake, are we going to have breakfast? If you insist on firing the cook, somebody in this household ought to be ready to assume kitchen responsibilities."

"We're coming," said Virginia. "Do see what Priscilla's doing."

Laban crossed to the window and looked out.

After a while he said, "She appears to be holding a conversation."

"Oh, yes, with the doll. I've noticed that," said Virginia.

"No, not with the doll."

"Not? Is she alone?"

"Yes. Her back's to the doll; she's not even looking at it."

Virginia turned. "Adelaide, will you go out and call her in for breakfast." And, when Adelaide had gone, she said to Laban, "I don't like to be called 'crude', Laban."

He shrugged. He had been thinking about what he might inherit if anything did happen to Priscilla; Virginia and planted seed in fertile ground. "Don't be, then," he said. "What do you suppose people would think if she died like that? After all, the terms of Cissie's will aren't a dead secret. There would be questions. Finally, poison can be traced—even the most obscure poison, which you wouldn't get hold of, anyway."

"If you can think of anything better, why don't you?"

"It would have to be an accident of some kind—or at least, look like one. Only the other day I read something in the *Sun* about an accident which took the lives of two children. Playing in the attic, locking themselves into a trunk. They were suffocated. That could so easily happen, you know. How could anyone prove differently? But poison involves certain chemical and physiological factors which are incapable of being made to tell a story different from the facts."

Adelaide came back, a little breathless. "Imaginary playmates, is it? She says George is out there somewhere, hiding from her. She says he talked to her."

Virginia smiled. "That is putting her innermost wish into a fantasy she can live. It's the height of imagination. What did he say?"

"She didn't tell me."

"Is she in?"

"She's coming."

"We shall see."

Priscilla came in and sat down at the table. It was not set. She waited, looking at the three of them—Uncle Laban, fat, jolly-looking except for his soft, full mouth and his small dark eyes; Aunt Adelaide with her grotesquely fat head, so heavy that it always lolled a little; Aunt Virginia with her thin line of mouth and her hard blue eyes. All were dressed in black—Adelaide in taffeta, Virginia in brocade, Laban in broadcloth. All were now busy in some fashion or other—Laban with the morning paper, Adelaide scurrying about to set the table, Virginia at getting breakfast.

It was hard for Priscilla to sit still, because she was convinced that Mr. George had slipped into the house with her, and was even now concealed somewhere in the room. Her eyes darted inquisitively this way and that; momentarily she expected him to reveal himself. But nothing happened, and meanwhile Adelaide had brought all the dishes and then at last came with Virginia bearing eggs and bacon and toast, and a glass of milk for Priscilla. All sat down, Laban putting his paper aside.

"With whom were you talking in the tea-house, Priscilla?" asked Virginia.

"With Celine," answered Priscilla around her glass of milk, which she had begun to drink.

"Who else?" asked Laban.

No answer.

"I asked you, who else?"

Priscilla shook her head.

"You told *me*," said Adelaide.

"Mr. George," said Priscilla.

"Indeed! And what did he say?" asked Virginia.

Priscilla shook her head again.

"Answer me."

Priscilla remained silent.

Virginia turned to the others. "You see, it's imagination."

"He came back last night. I asked him to," said Priscilla.

Adelaide tittered. Virginia flashed her a quick, angry glance.

Laban hawked and bent to his bacon and eggs.

There were no more questions. Each of them was thinking his own thoughts. Priscilla still hoped secretly for Mr. George to pop up and surprise them all. Adelaide thought of the way in which children played by themselves. Virginia contemplated the three of them alone in the house—their house—without Priscilla. Laban thought there was no good in delaying matters; accidents did not wait upon auspicious moments. Besides, the concept of a hundred thousand dollars which might be his to do with as he liked had grown immeasurably and now loomed directly before his mind's eye as a vast mountain of epitomized freedom, opening the world to him as it had never been open before.

Finishing his breakfast, he gazed at Priscilla, who had also finished, and smiled. "Where did George go?" he asked.

She was disarmed. "I think he's hiding."

"I'll bet I know where he's hiding," continued Laban.

"Should we go and look?"

"Oh, yes, let's."

Laban pushed his chair away and got up. "Come along, then."

"Excuse me," said Priscilla to the two women.

They went out into the hall, Priscilla clinging to his hand.

"I know just where he would be," said Laban, leading the way to the stairs.

"Upstairs?"

"In the attic. It's dark there."

The dimness of the attic resolved itself for Laban into a giant funnel at the end of which loomed the partly-filled steamer trunk not far from the top of the attic stairs. He began to circle the outer edge of the funnel, moving things and looking behind them. Priscilla darted here and there, but every few moments she stood quite still and asked questioningly of the musty twilight, "Mr. George?"

"We'll find him," said Laban each time, with a nervous heartiness. His hands were clammy, and cold sweat started to his forehead as he drew nearer and nearer to the trunk.

The trunk was large and very heavy; once inside, it would be quite impossible for Priscilla to lift the lid, even if the hasp were not caught. All the darkness of the attic, which was large and reached into the gables of the old house, seemed to converge upon the trunk. Twice Priscilla stopped almost beside it.

"He isn't here," said Priscilla at last.

"I'll bet he is," said Laban. "There's one more place just big enough to hide him. Right there."

He bent and lifted the heavy lid. The trunk was almost as deep as Priscilla was tall, though the things still packed in it diminished its depth a little. He looked at the child from the corners of his eyes; she seemed entranced, standing almost on tiptoe to peer toward the dark maw of the trunk.

"That's too dark for me to see him even if he is there," said Laban. "Maybe he's hidden under the clothes. Crawl in and find him, Pris."

Priscilla took two steps forward and heard someone say, "No, Priscilla."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "It's Mr. George!"

"What?" Laban was startled.

"He's here somewhere. I heard him."

Laban gazed at her with amazed wonder at the vividness of her imagination. Then he said, "I'll bet he's hidden under this clothing. Just crawl in and surprise him, Pris."

She shook her head. "Mr. George says not to."

A kind of exasperation was growing in him. He came down to his knees beside the trunk. "See," he said, "I'll prop up the lid." He pushed a heavy book upright between the lid and the trunk. "I'll be right here in case he comes out."

Priscilla shook her head. "You look," she said.

He thought quickly. If she could be persuaded to stand beside him, it would be simple to tip her into the trunk without any kind of rough handling which might later show a bruise on the delicate flesh.

"Come and help me," he said, bending to peer into the darkness.

Priscilla came forward.

Just short of him something stopped her, something like an invisible hand pressing her back. Something tall and dark took shadowy shape beside Laban where he knelt, waiting for her, something that reached down and tore the sustaining book from beneath the trunk-lid, something that pushed the trunk-lid down with weighty impact upon Laban Leckett's neck.

He gave a choking cry, humped up horribly, and collapsed, kicking a little.

"Go away, Priscilla. Go downstairs now."

"Yes, Mr. George."

Priscilla went obediently out of the attic, down the stairs, and back to the tea-house, where she sat and told Celine all about it, very animated.

At the window stood Virginia, looking out with narrowed eyes and a derisive smile on her face. "I knew it," she said over her

shoulder to Adelaide. "There never was much man about Laban. He lost his nerve."

On the day after the funeral, Laura Craig came to call. Like the Leckett women, Laura Craig was in her fifties, but she looked considerably younger. She dressed well, having money and knowing how to use it, knowing it was only a means to an end, not an end in itself. She had been a beautiful woman, and was still a strikingly handsome one; in appearance there was the difference of day and night between her and her hostesses, Laura being colorful and jeweled as against their almost offensive plainness.

"I was shocked to read about Laban," she said without preamble. "I read it only this morning. I've been up in Connecticut, and I am sorry to have missed the services. However did such a thing happen?"

"The lid of the trunk was very heavy," said Virginia, quick to speak before Adelaide could say anything. "I suppose Laban was careless."

"How dreadful!" exclaimed Laura. "But what was he looking for?"

Virginia shrugged, and raised her eyebrows.

"Something of father's, we think," said Adelaide. "That was father's trunk, you know. The last time it was used was when father went to the Exposition in St. Louis."

"It was only by accident that we found him," added Virginia. "We just missed him finally, and went to look for him. He had been dead quite a while. It was awful—the trunk-lid came down with such force that it almost severed his head. We have destroyed the trunk, naturally."

"I should think so," said Laura.

The talk drifted politely toward Priscilla, and presently Priscilla herself was walking down to the front gate with Laura

Craig, whom she also called "Aunt". The sisters Leckett stood behind the curtains at the windows to make sure that Priscilla did not linger too long with this woman, whom they knew had come primarily to assure herself that the child was all right.

"Let us hope she says nothing of her absurd fancies to *her*," said Virginia bitterly.

"You forbade her to speak of them again."

"Oh, I know—but children recognize no restrictions. Will she ever forget George Newell? I wonder."

"It won't make any difference, will it?" Adelaide tittered.

"Be still, Adelaide." She sighed. "What *could* have happened up there? Laban was never careless!"

"You know what she said."

"Oh, Addie! A farrago of shadows and George and nonsense! Are you thinking the house is haunted by George? How laughable!"

Adelaide sniffed a little and left the window.

"It can't be denied, however, that Laban's death leaves each of us richer by fifty thousand dollars—after Priscilla, that is."

"How can you say such a thing, Addie!" said Virginia sharply.

Adelaide turned. "How can I say what?"

"What you just said about Laban's death."

"I didn't say anything about Laban's death."

Virginia turned angrily. "Why, Addie! I heard you. Don't try to deny it."

"Are you out of your mind, Ginny? I haven't opened my mouth. What did you imagine you heard now?"

"You said we would each be richer by fifty thousand dollars as a result of Laban's death."

"Why, I never!"

"You did!"

"I did not! That, if anything, is a thought which would occur to you a long time before I would think of it." Thoughtfully, she added, "It's true, though, isn't it?"

Virginia said nothing. Something gnawed persistently at her consciousness; it was the knowledge that if something were to happen to Adelaide before Priscilla died, she, Virginia, would come into three hundred thousand dollars, without the need of sharing it with anyone at all. A little shaken, she forgot about Priscilla and Laura Craig out in the afternoon sun at the gate and came away from the window. She was caught in a mesh of greed and conflicting desires.

The cedar limb tapped against the house once for every five times the old clock in the hall said *tick-tock*. Priscilla counted in the dark, and communicated her findings to Celine, whom she had permitted to share her bed that night. She set herself next to counting the times the faucet dripped. But this, she found, was next to impossible, for the drippings were never very certain or clear. And there were other sounds alive in the dark in the old house. The attic shutter was loose; it creaked and banged in the wind. Something rustled down the hall, and Priscilla knew it was Aunt Adelaide again; in a few moments their voices made a murmuring sound which joined the voices of the night.

In her sister's room, Adelaide walked nervously beside the bed. "It's no use your telling me it's my imagination, Virginia. I know I saw something. This is the third time, and I never heard that hallucinations come in threes."

"And what was it this time? Try to be coherent, Addie."

"A shadow in the hall, at the head of the stairs."

"If you weren't so vain about your eyes, I think an oculist and a pair of spectacles would lay your shadow."

"I stood still. The shadow moved. It was a man." Her words came faster. "Do you think I *wanted* to see him? Do you? Because if you do, you're crazy! I want to get out of this house. I hate it! I've hated it all my life—since we had to come and live here as Cissie's 'guests'."

"So do I. Just be patient, Addie. It takes time."

"Yes, always waiting!" She turned and bent over Virginia, instinctively lowering her voice. "I've thought of something. You know what Laban said about accidents. I've watched her swing. That's an awfully heavy swing, and when George made it for her he reinforced the oak seat with iron. If she should jump too soon and not get out of the way quickly enough—and if it should catch her somehow . . . I think it could happen."

"Or be made to happen," added Virginia softly. "Think of that now, Addie, instead of absurd hallucinations. And for heaven's sake, don't tell anyone you think you see men on the stairs—you know what people would think!"

Grandfather Dedman's clock said, "Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Go-to sleep-now, Pris-sie." This time the cedar limb tapped on "sleep." Priscilla snuggled deeper into her bed and turned to Celine.

"Are you sleepy, Celine?" she asked.

Celine obligingly indicated that she was not.

Aunt Adelaide rustled back down the hall to her own room. Priscilla knew that her aunts had things to say to each other they did not want her to hear. She wondered sometimes what it might be they talked about, but she did not mind their ignoring her. No more did she care to have them listen to her conversations with Celine. Or with Mr. George.

She raised up on her elbows and peered into the darkness of the room. Little light came in from outside; the close-pressing

trees shut away all but two small rays of the street-lights; one of these struck the opposite wall near the door, the other hit the mirror, where it reflected like a dim opening to a remote world of day.

"Mr. George, are you there?" she whispered into the darkness.

"Yes, Priscilla."

The answer came, it seemed, from all around her and from inside her at the same time. She did not question it.

"Please come where I can see you."

A part of the darkness near the door detached itself and drifted toward her bed; it crossed the light but did not shut it away from the mirror or the door; it left no shadow because it was itself a shadow. It hovered over the bed, and settled down to one side of it, sitting there. It was not strange to Priscilla. She was comforted.

"Say good-night to Mr. George, Celine," she said.

Clad in her negligee, Laura Craig wrote to George Newell's brother in London, the hour being late and everything still, save for the hum of life in the city, the vast subterrene roar, muted by night, the susurrations of millions of creatures moving inexorably from birth to death like the sound of earth's turning. She wrote swiftly. The words came easily, for they had been pent up so long . .

". . . I think there is no question but that Priscilla is George's child. She has his look about her eyes; that was not so noticeable a short time ago, but now it is coming out. And she is constantly obsessed with him. I do not know that that is good. Surely George would not think so if he were still alive, though he was absolutely devoted to her, as you know; so many of us thought that was because of Cissie and her slow dying. What is important, I think, is

that some way ought to be found to take Priscilla away from the Lecketts. They are definitely nineteenth century, and they have that kind of repressive way of life which is actually more wicked and evil than sheer wantonness. I mean that they certainly always resented being pitied by Cissie and even her goodness, which they never deserved. They are *not* good for Priscilla, though I found her remarkably self-contained, which is probably because she is left alone so very much. That is not good, either, I think you will agree. She has found time to think up the strangest fancies. For instance, she believes that George is still in the house. She says that George pushed the trunk-lid down on Laban's neck. That is absurd, of course; it is the wildest of fancies—but from all I have heard, the lid did more damage to Laban's neck than it ought to have done, if it fell under its own power. There is something very strange about all this, and it will come as no surprise to you to learn that I have begun to wonder a little about George's death, too. After all, his heart wasn't *that* bad. I saw him only three days before he died, and he said then that his condition seemed somewhat improved by sedentary living. I have to admit that my impression of the Lecketts is of the worst—I think they are selfish, greedy, lazy, and evil people, who, behind their old-fashioned respectability, are capable of absolutely anything . . .”

The summer deepened, and as it grew more sultry, Priscilla spent still more of her time in the yard. Her routine in the morning was unvaried. She went to the tea-house before breakfast, and returned to it afterward. Sometimes she received little notes and presents from Laura Craig, after which she was plagued by questions from Aunt Virginia and Aunt Adelaide. Priscilla could not know that the women were anxious to learn whether she had told Laura Craig anything; Priscilla, failing to understand the real goals of their innocuous questions, did not say. She fenced

with them unconsciously, thwarting them. Though she did not understand, she was conscious of a feeling of dislike for her in them; but this did not trouble her; as long as they inflicted no punishment beyond the meanness of their words or actions upon her.

In the afternoon she worked in her own little garden, which the women had allowed her to keep in one corner. And later, she retreated to the heavily shaded portion of the walled lawn where the swing hung from the limb of an ancient oak tree. She could swing for hours; from the top of the arc she made, she could look out into the street and once in a while she could see the street-car going by. Swinging gave her a sense of wild freedom; swinging made her feel that she had escaped the house and the women, that she was back in a world of green trees and sun and sky and birds, like that lovely lost time in Paris and Sorrento and on the beaches in Florida, when they had all three still been together—mama and Mr. George and she. She never tired of pumping with her sturdy little legs until she was high enough to see, and she was glad that no one ever told her to stop. Once in a while, too, Aunt Adelaide had come out to push her, which was even better.

That August afternoon Aunt Adelaide came out again.

"Today I will jump from higher yet," said Priscilla.

She had learned, under Aunt Adelaide's urging, how much fun it was to leap from the careening swing, to fly through the air, as it were, under her own power.

Aunt Adelaide smiled.

It was a day of clouds, with rain impending. The birds were still, and Celine sat sedately forgotten in the tea-house. There was no wind, and the oak leaves drooped with wonderful pungence over that corner of the lawn, shutting out most of the sky, protecting them from the curious eyes of neighbors.

"I will jump from so high," said Priscilla.

"No, that's too high."

"I can do it, Aunt Adelaide."

"No, Priscilla, that is too high. You might break a leg or something. Just think, six feet."

Priscilla was insistent. "I can so jump from that high."

"No," said Aunt Adelaide shortly. "You may jump only from so high."

"But I jumped from that high the last time."

"Just the same, that's high enough."

Adelaide had calculated very carefully. Priscilla jumped in a kind of crouch; then she straightened up and began to run back to get into the swing again. If she were halted at just the right place in that run back, and her attention distracted, the swing would catch her on the back of the head with deadly force. Because Priscilla reminded her of Cissie, whom she had always envied as a girl because of her beauty, so much in contrast to Adelaide's over-sized head, Adelaide hated Priscilla. It seemed to her the most important thing in the world to do something to that lovely little head, because somehow she would be doing something to that even lovelier head which had been Cissie's; obscurely she would achieve a kind of compensation for the abnormality of her own. It was far more important than the money which meant so much to Virginia.

"At least, to begin with, that's high enough," amended Aunt Adelaide.

"I'll jump later, then."

"We shall see. Come, get in."

Priscilla climbed into the swing and Adelaide began to push her slowly, steadily. The swing's arc increased. Now Priscilla could see level with the top of the wall; now she could see over; now she was well up in the hot August air, almost brushing the

leaves, taking deep breaths of the oak's perfume each time she came up under the leaves. And the street-car was coming, *clang-clang* at the corner, and up toward the house; she would see it from both ends of the arc. She always hoped that the conductor would see her, so that she could wave to him; but he never did. The limbs and the leaves were too thick, and he never looked up much from the tracks.

Adelaide stopped pushing her and stepped back a little.

"Stay sitting now," she said.

"I am," said Priscilla.

The swing began to slow down, the arc to diminish. She came down from the leafy sky, she came down out of heaven each time a little more. She came away from a pewee singing up in the oak tree, back toward Aunt Adelaide waiting to catch the swing as soon as she had jumped.

"I'm going to jump now."

"Not yet."

She waited a moment.

"Now, then."

"Not yet."

She waited another of the diminishing arcs.

"Now," she said, and jumped, throwing up her arms like a bird, and like a white bird flying to the ground, coming down in a supple crouch and bounding to her feet.

"Oh, fun!" she cried and turned to run to Aunt Adelaide, who stood with the swing held high over her head.

"Oh, look—a redbird!" cried Aunt Adelaide, pointing toward the wall.

Priscilla stopped and turned quickly.

With all her strength, Adelaide pushed the heavy swing. The curve was right; it would catch Priscilla on the back of the head

just past the lowest point of the arc; it would crush and mangle forever that lovely head which was so like Cissie's, that head so lovely in contrast to her own. She took three steps forward, the simulated cry of horror already rising in her throat . . . and faltered.

The swing stopped short of Priscilla's head.

Caught in a dark, gangling shadow that seemed to depend from the tree, the swing went swiftly up and vanished into the oak. Then it came hurtling down with incredible force, clear of Priscilla, straight at Adelaide. Fear rooted her there directly in its path. The heavy, iron-reinforced board struck her across the temple; she dropped without a sound, while the child still looked in vain for the bird.

Priscilla turned and saw the woman crumpled there.

"Aunt Adelaide!" she cried.

Aunt Virginia came running from the house, crying, "Addie! Addie!"

"Go to your room, Priscilla."

The voice came in the whisper of the oak leaves, where a wind was starting up; it rose out of the shadowed heart of the tree and descended all about her like a cloak, as if to shut away the mangled head and the blood there, and the sight of Aunt Virginia like a mad-woman coming to her knees beside Adelaide's body.

"All right, Mr. George," said Priscilla.

After Priscilla was in bed, Aunt Virginia came into the room. She came over and sat down beside her on the bed. The undertaker had come and gone a long time ago, and some men from a newspaper had been and gone, too.

"Tell me how it happened now, Priscilla."

"I don't know."

"Why are you so stubborn?"

"I don't know. She said to look at the redbird. I tried to see it. I couldn't. When I turned around, she was on the ground."

"What else?"

"Nothing, except that Mr. George told me to go to my room."

"George?"

"Yes."

"Did you see him?"

"No."

"No what?"

"No, Aunt Virginia."

"How do you know it was George?"

"I know."

"How?"

"I heard him." She spoke resentfully, not understanding why Aunt Virginia pressed her so. "Besides, Mr. George talks to me every night before I go to sleep."

Aunt Virginia looked grim and pale. Her lips were twitching a little at one corner and her eyes were narrowed. Her hands were clenched on her kness. Deep within her there was a trembling of fear, an insistent awareness which she pushed back with fierce determination.

"You are a wicked little girl," said Aunt Virginia. "What does he say?"

Priscilla, hurt, shook her head.

"Answer me."

Priscilla said nothing.

"Priscilla!"

No answer.

Baffled and angry, Virginia got up and walked out of the room, turning the light switch at the door.

Priscilla waited until she was sure the woman had gone; then

she got up in the darkness and found her doll. She returned to bed with it, and tucked Celine in. Then she tiptoed to the door and opened it a little. Aunt Virginia had gone downstairs; a faint scratching sound rose to Priscilla's listening ears. Aunt Virginia was writing something; but of course, she would be writing all about Adelaide. Priscilla closed the door soundlessly and tiptoed back to her bed, crawling in and snuggling close to Celine.

All the intimate sounds of the old house crept into the room, bringing their tranquility. Swinging always made Priscilla tired, and even though she had not been swung as much as usual that afternoon, she was still tired. She drowsed, but she did not sleep. She waited confidently for Mr. George to come.

Having finished her letter, Virginia Leckett put out the lamp and stood for a moment to accustom herself to the darkness. Then she went up the stairs without light. She paused at Priscilla's door.

What was it within? Voices or a voice?

She listened.

"Why don't you ever come where I can see you plainer, Mr. George?"

Virginia heard no answer.

"Do you sleep there by the door, Mr. George?"

No sound.

"All right, Mr. George."

Thereafter, silence.

Noiselessly, Virginia opened the door and looked into the room. The bed was spectral over near the window, and the child dark in it. Darkness filled the room—and yet more dark. Was it an accident of sight that she seemed to see a dark shadow hulking there beside the bed? Yes? Or no? Virginia stared. The intensity of her gaze tricked her; the rays of light from the street seemed to dance; they shone through the shadow beside the bed. Virginia

closed her eyes and held her lids down; then she flashed them open. Nothing had changed.

She withdrew, closing the door and standing with her back against it.

In a moment she was sharply, frighteningly aware of menace beyond the door, a potent danger threatening her. It was intangible, but all the more frightening for that intangibility. She started away from the door to stand in the middle of the hall. She took hold of herself, grimly. She was too close to her goal now to be frightened by her imagination. She came back to the door once again, pressing against it with the length of her body. There was something beyond it, something lurking there, waiting. She clenched her hands in a gesture of defiance and moved away to her own room.

There she sat for a long time trying to think what it was that had seized hold of her imagination so vividly, trying to piece together the events of Priscilla's world, thinking always of the insistent fact that, now that Adelaide was gone, she alone would inherit three hundred thousand dollars as soon as Priscilla was gone. That was the world, that was independence, security, freedom for life.

It was late when they came back from the funeral. Virginia had thriftily engaged a car to take them to the cemetery, but not to bring them back. They came back on the street-car. Laura Craig's presence at the services had vexed Virginia, so that she was unusually short with Priscilla. She recognized that Laura would have liked control over Priscilla; she knew that Laura was genuinely fond of the child, and she resented this—not because of any feeling of possession, but simply because she knew that when something happened to Priscilla, Laura Craig would put

people up to asking questions. It was a wonder she had not done so about George Newell.

As she stepped into the hall in the late afternoon, Virginia thought she saw someone standing at the foot of the stairs; but at that moment Priscilla darted forward with a little cry, and she followed her with her eyes where she ran for the stairs and up. When she looked back, there was nothing there. Nevertheless, she was troubled by the increasing frequency of what could only be illusions.

She put away her good coat and hat, and went out into the kitchen to put together something for the supper table. In the routine of getting a meal, she forgot about her illusions, and thought only about how long she must wait before she could take care of Priscilla and enter upon that new world of her dreams.

Priscilla came in, divested of her good clothes and plainly attired in a print dress.

"Didn't you see him, Aunt Virginia?" she cried.

"See whom?"

"Mr. George. He was really and truly standing there when we came in."

Virginia prevented herself from striking the child just in time. She stood looking at her coldly for a long time before she could bring herself to speak. "I never want to hear his name again, do you understand?"

"Yes, Aunt Virginia."

"I never want it mentioned in this house again, do you hear?"

"Yes, Aunt Virginia. You don't have to scream."

"I'm not screaming!"

Her voice screamed back at her from the walls, shrill, raucous, unpleasant, until the sound diminished and faded into the kitchen's silence, which lay like a mountain between the child with her curious bright eyes, and the angry, frightened woman.

The summer passed, and autumn came with rain.

In October, Virginia Leckett could contain herself no longer. Her patience had worn thin. Even the need of showing some superficial concern for Priscilla was becoming increasingly difficult, especially when she thought of how only this child stood between her and the fortune which, by now, she had convinced herself should have been hers all along.

She had evolved a plan for what must be Priscilla's fatal accident. It was not original. She had observed that the child was in the habit of running along the upper hall and down the stairs, despite their steepness. It should be a very simple matter to fix a thin wire across the head of the stairs, half a foot or so from the floor; Priscilla could not possibly avoid tripping over it. The tumble down the stairs might not kill her, but the chances were good that it would.

She waited one night until Priscilla had gone to her room. Then she went quickly to the head of the stairs and fixed the wire around the posts there, and, stepping over it, hastened to the foot of the stairs.

"Priscilla!" she called. "Come down here—quick!"

From where she stood, she could make out the thin wire because a little light struck up toward it from below. It would be invisible to Priscilla.

The door of Priscilla's room opened. "Did you call me, Aunt Virginia?"

"Yes. Come down, quick."

She came running down the hall.

Virginia stood open-mouthed, watching, a kind of bestial eagerness stirring within her.

But at the head of the stairs Priscilla stopped. A kind of shuddering horror chilled Virginia, for she saw a familiar dark shadow holding the child back with one tenuous arm, while with the

other it unwound the wire from the posts. Only when it had been pulled away from Priscilla's path was she permitted to go on.

Down she came.

"What's the matter, Aunt Virginia?"

"Virginia's tongue was thick. I told you—to come—quick. What kept you?"

"*He* did."

"Who?"

"You know who. You said not to mention his name again."

A harsh burst of laughter broke from Virginia's dry lips. She reached down and took the child by the hand.

"Come along," she said. "We'll see."

She went up the stairs, forcing herself, driving herself every step of the way, so that Priscilla walked always a little ahead of her. They went directly to Priscilla's room. Virginia stopped at the threshold.

"There is nobody here but us," she said. "Do you see?"

Priscilla looked around. "He can hide anywhere," she said.

Virginia shook her. "Do you hear me? There is nobody here but us. Say that after me."

"You're hurting me."

"Say it!" said Virginia in a furious voice.

"There is nobody here but us," repeated Priscilla, frightened now.

"There is nobody in this house but us," Virginia went on, her voice rising. "Say it. Go on—say it."

"There is nobody in this house but us," said Priscilla. She took a deep breath and added courageously, "And Mr. George."

In an access of thwarted rage, Virginia beat Priscilla unmercifully until the child escaped her and ran to hide under the bed. Breathing heavily, Virginia left the room, slamming the door, and

leaning against it to listen. Only the child's sobbing came into the darkness of the hall.

"Are you ready, Virginia?"

She whirled.

Standing almost near enough to touch her was a dark something that spoke to her in George Newell's voice—a horrible sentient darkness without substance but exuding a malignance great enough to send her pulse high in terror. The malign shadow reached toward her.

She screamed and burst away.

She ran faster than she had ever run before toward the stairs.

Too late, she saw that the wire was back in place. She tripped and hurtled down the stairs like a rag doll, while the shadow paused to unwind the wire once again.

Priscilla, after a few moments of uncertainty, came to the threshold of her room and stood in the open doorway.

"Aunt Virginia?" she asked of the darkness.

"Priscilla."

"Yes, Mr. George."

"Priscilla, go to Laura. Tell her Aunt Virginia fell downstairs and broke her neck. You are going to stay with Laura now."

"Yes, Mr. George. Are you coming, too?"

"No. I'm going away, and this time I'll stay. Unless you need me."

"Oh, don't go, Mr. George!"

"Get your things and go to Laura, Priscilla."

Obediently she went back to her room and got Celine out of bed. She put on Celine's hat and then her own. Grandfather Dedman's clock said, "Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Pris-sie, Go-to sleep-now, Pris-sie," and then struck ten sombre bongs which rang through the house like a tocsin.

Priscilla went out of the room and down the stairs, walking carefully around Aunt Virginia, expecting that any moment that horrible inert mass might spring up and beat her again. At the front door she turned and looked bravely back into the darkness.

"Goodbye, Mr. George," she said.

She thought there was an answer, but she could not be sure. Perhaps it was just Grandfather Dedman's clock with a last, reproachful "Pris-sie."

She got on the street-car at the corner.

"Are you alone, Miss Priscilla?" asked the conductor. "At this time of night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you run away?"

"Oh no. I've got to go somewhere else." Gravely, she told him the address.

"Why, that's way over on the other side of the city! What can she be thinking of to let you go alone!"

Irate, he clanged a passing taxi to a stop, got out with Priscilla and put her into it, giving the driver explicit directions.

Laura Craig, white-faced, listened to Priscilla, and, having heard, went directly to the telephone. She called the Leckett house.

Priscilla heard the ringing for a long time. But, of course, there was no answer. So she knew that Mr. George was gone, too, like all the rest of them.

Parrington's Pool

For the entire length of Featherman's Brook, there was never another pool like Parrington's for sizable trout. A good deep pool, with willows and alders around it—not too close, so that there was room for the dry-fly angler to ply his rod—and a falls at the head of it, making a constant music there and a foaming of waters. The trout held to the pool as they held to no other, and Judge Cadman Hawley and Tom Boyle fished it regularly, each in his own way, until Tom was gone; and then the Judge fished it alone, until he, too, was gone. Now the dry fly falls into it no more, though the trout are still there, and only the whip-poorwills and the owls haunt the pool in the evening hours where once old Tom and the Judge were rivals for the fish.

Judge Cadman Hawley was a hard man, said his friends and enemies alike; which was to say that he had not a streak of sentiment in him, but hewed strictly to the letter of the law, and made the letter his interpretation. He lived by it, and said he meant to die by it. He administered the law year after year with unqualified impartiality, deciding degrees of ownership and the precise quality of guilt. He severed marriage bonds when ample cause appeared to him, and refused to do so when he saw no cause, no matter what others thought of any case; he sent delinquent children to institutions of reform with commendable dispatch; he sentenced every petty criminal on the theory that swift and strong punishment might act as a deterrent in the future.

A hard man, according to the lights of those who knew him.

He set up a furore when he refused a divorce to Jed Marshall and his wife, after which Jed went home and in two days shot her; thereafter Jed went speedily to prison, and no hesitation about that. He invited criticism, which he scorned, when he sent one of the Gregory twins to the reformatory and let the other, who appeared equally culpable, go free. And when he took Tom Boyle's teen-age girl away from Tom, and castigated Tom as a no good, drunken wastrel, there was some difference of opinion, Tom being drunk, certainly, from time to time, unruly, and a repeated offender, not a man a young and growing girl ought to live with, true, but at least he loved his daughter, and she him, they were but two alone, and had no one else, and there was some question, by no means spurious, whether or not the Judge had taken this means to effect some petty vengeance because of Tom Boyle's superior qualities as an angler, a sport in the exercise of which Judge Hawley took an overweening pride.

However, the girl was taken away and put into a home with "decent" folks, who worked her from morning until night and begrudged her the schooling she was able to get; while Tom moved in and out of the court and the jail and bemoaned his plight and threatened to avenge himself, in turn, and separate the Judge from that he loved the best, which was an idle threat, for the Judge loved nothing but himself, he loved his life better than anything apart from it, doing as he pleased—a hulk of a man, big in chest and belly, with a square jaw and gimlet eyes and bushy brows, giving him a ferocious but not entirely unkindly look, though Judge Hawley's kindnesses were always tempered with a fine interpretation of the legal aspects of any case in point.

At last the Judge had his most earnest wish. Tom disappeared, and thus the ablest angler of the township was gone, and Judge Hawley had Featherman's Brook all to himself, for no one else

in the vicinity knew the art of the dry fly, and none could hope to practise it as well and to such good effect as he. There were some who asked where Tom had gone, particularly his daughter, for his old hat was found on the edge of the brook near to Parrington's pool at the foot of the falls—the deepest in the brook, and by all odds, the widest, too—but the Judge disagreed with the popular verdict that Tom had drowned himself in his misery at being separated from the one person he loved, and would not permit the pool to be dragged, fearful that the trout would be too grievously disturbed, deciding with judicious finality that if indeed Tom had drowned himself, he would float in good time, and that was an end to it.

But Tom never came up, he never came back, his hat went to his daughter, and where he had gone no one knew. Judge Hawley pointed to his absence as evidence—if more were needed—of his wanton irresponsibility. But the Judge was a hard man, everyone knew that, and everyone accepted that for the fact, and there was no good in argument against it, for no argument would change it.

The Judge, however, had little pleasure in fishing Featherman's Brook all by himself. There was no more of his suddenly turning a bend toward his favorite pool and finding Tom Boyle there ahead of him with a nice creel of trout, a smirk on his face and an uncivil tongue in his head, enough to send him into a dither of rage, but likewise a sort of challenge which aroused the sporting instinct in him to some sort of answer; so there was no longer any reason or impulse to beat Tom Boyle at his game. Nor was there any more of coming upon that smell of sweet tobacco smoke Tom drifted out behind him, though several times the Judge fancied that he smelled it, but in every case he was alone at the brook and nobody else in sight.

Day after day in the season the Judge fished the brook, driv-

ing up to Featherman's farm and leaving his car there, as had been his custom from the beginning of his fishing years, never failing to encounter old Whitney Featherman in the vicinity of his car on his return.

"How'd ye do today, Judge?" he asked each time.

"Middling fair, Whit. I guess the big ones are all gone."

"Not out of Parrington's, they ain't."

But never a big one did the Judge take out of Parrington's pool. Now and then a strike, and now and then a catch—just enough so that he knew there was something still left in the pool at the foot of the falls.

Old Featherman, however, grew queerer and queerer, always asking curious questions about Parrington's.

"Anybody else a-fishin' it today?"

"Nobody."

"Thought I seen someone headin' down that way."

"Nobody there. Fished it for an hour. Took out two fair ones."

And next time it was much the same, with the old man not half so interested in the content of his creel as he appeared to be in the contents of the Judge's face, standing next the car and watching with narrowed eyes.

"For sure nobody at Parrington's, Judge?"

"No one but me."

"Was a-walkin' by there not so long before you come. Could a sworn someone was a-fishin' it. Whipped out his fly nice as you please."

"Take anything?"

"Not so's I could see it."

"What was he fishing?"

"Looked like a Parmachene Belle."

"Eh! Tom Boyle's fly. Whoever he was, he'd gone by the time

I got there. I fished down from your pasture line."

Featherman's angler, whoever he might be, managed to elude Judge Hawley's vigilance for some time. No matter how early he recessed his court, the Judge could not encounter him.

But at last, fishing late one evening, he had a brief glimpse of him—a shabby, nondescript man, fishing at the far edge on the far side of Parrington's pool. A skillful angler, too, judged by the brief glance of him that he got, for he wielded his rod and line with singular ability, and placed his fly beautifully, so that the Judge was filled with anticipation of rivalry—perhaps a rival not as good as Tom Boyle had been, which suited Judge Hawley's nature, but no amateur. However, when he came around the falls, his fellow angler had gone. The Judge had a curious illusion in the gathering twilight that his near companion had left his hat behind, but this was not so, he saw at a more intense scrutiny of the farther shore. A trick of the growing dusk.

So it was the evening hour that the mysterious angler preferred, regardless of what old Featherman had said, and it was thenceforth the evening hour that the Judge meant to fish the brook. He confided to his farming host that he had caught sight of his angler.

"What did he have on?" inquired Featherman, his eyes narrowed.

"Brown clothes, I think."

Featherman nodded. "That's him. Same clothing all the time. He's a queer one, Judge. Gits away like a bird in the brush. Once he's there, next thing, he's gone. The other night but one—after you'd gone—he took a beauty out of Parrington's."

"How big?"

"I'd say four pounds. Biggest one come outa there in years."

"Two pounds would be more like it."

"Always at Parrington's, too. Never seen him above the falls. Never seen him at the Wilson pool. Never seen him down at Tal-lon's."

"Well, Parrington's always was the best."

"Didn't take him long to find that out, for a newcomer."

Nor did it, and that was a fact not to be gainsaid.

The Judge recessed court a little later and came out at four, began to fish Parrington's, and moved up to Wilson's pool, and on to Stuart's bend. By sundown, he came on back, fishing as he went. Once he saw his fellow angler from above the falls, and stood silently watching him. A neat turn of the wrist, the fellow had, and an effortless manner of whipping his rod and line back and forth, drawing out just the right amount of line each time, and placing his fly with great skill. His face the Judge could not quite see, for his battered hat hid it. He had a familiar look, somehow, but he could be no one Judge Hawley knew.

Envious, the Judge moved quietly around the falls and came on down the slope, screened by the willows there. He heard the flicking lash of line in the water, the touch of sound—a minute splash—when the fly was placed—a kind of music of which he never tired, came out from behind the bush and saw the fly—a *Parmachene Belle*, right enough, just as Featherman had said—and saw the line, and, following it, saw the end of the rod, and following that, nothing. There was no one there. He looked back, startled. No rod, no line, no *Parmachene Belle*, not even a ripple in the water of Parrington's pool—nothing.

A finger of cold ran up his spine and was gone.

In a moment he swore. Someone was having him. There was unfortunately no crossing place to enable him to follow through the bushes on the far side, and the sound of the falls was too loud to permit the hearing of footsteps.

He fished the pool a while, took out one trout, and by that time the darkness had come down, and he was off.

Next night he tried again. A cool night for summer, with a hint of rain in the air. He followed the same pattern—fishing Parrington's pool first, and then moving up and coming back down. This time, however, he took the far side of the brook, and came down soundlessly behind the alders on the bank above the falls.

There he was, sure enough, and what a wrist he had! Out and back, out and back, out and back, and the fly placed just right, just in that dark place under the little bank from which he sometimes fished. Something rose to it, too, but was not hooked. Was he using a *Parmachene Belle* again? But it was too dim to see, dusk coming more quickly under a sky of clouds.

He came out boldly to the head of the falls and called, "You, there. I'm coming down. I want to talk to you."

Singularly direct and forthright, as always. Thereupon, he moved down, keeping an eye on his fellow angler, who had not turned his head at the sound of his voice, had not, indeed, given any sign of having heard, much to the Judge's annoyance. But, watching or not watching, of a sudden he was gone. One moment there, off the next—just as old Featherman had said.

This time, however, Judge Hawley was ready. There was but one way he could have gone—straight back through the fringe of bushes to the pastureland beyond, and out across the edge of Featherman's to the road. The Judge hurled himself through the bushes and burst out into the pasture, looking eagerly in the direction his fellow angler must take.

No one there. Nothing.

Irate, he marched to Featherman's.

"Seen anything of him?" he asked.

"That one in brown clothes?"

"Yes."

"Not a smitch. Never seen him anywheres but Parrington's."

"Damn it, Man! He just came through ahead of me."

"Didn't see him. I was standin' here all the time too, expectin' you."

The Judge was baffled, but resolved to waylay his fellow angler on the next night.

The day was trying, however, and court held longer. There were several annoying cases, and old Tom Boyle's daughter, Jennie, now come of age, had appeared and demanded that some search be made for Tom, just a year gone. He had had difficulty in putting her off, and there were bitter words between them, in addition to tears from her and some acidulous comments from him, thwarted in his eagerness to reach the pool below the falls.

But at last he got there, on the edge of night.

No one was there. He put his rod together, put on a Royal Coachman, and tried his luck. The evening was quiet and beautiful. No wind blew, no cloud lay in heaven, and the even-song of birds rose all around to mingle with the pleasant babble of the falls—robins, mourning doves, wood thrushes, killdeers—and even one lone whippoorwill's voice rising. Wild ginger grew in the lowland, and bellwort nodded along the pool. The dark water gave off the face of heaven here and there, and reflected the trees where the falls' descending waters did not break the surface save in ripples. Its foam was white and spectral in the growing dusk.

He took off his Royal Coachman and put on a Parmachene Belle.

He placed it on the dark water just under the bank—his favorite spot—and a favorite, too, with many a trout. The line made a

faint singing where it flicked through the air, back and forth, and the hush of water about the fly, struck and drawn away, rose distantly against the talk of the falls.

He looked around him from time to time, but saw no one.

He moved to a higher bank, and tried again.

This time the rise came—and by what sight of it he had in the failing light, a sockdolager! a monster trout!—a long whiteness leaping to the surface, breaking water, vanishing with the Parmachene Belle. The line leaped out and down. Judge Hawley, tingling with excitement, gave further line until he felt it slacken; then he began to reel it in, cautiously at first, then with increasing confidence. The trout had gone down to the bottom, and there he lay now in some dark hole, falsely secure until the tautening line and the pull upon his mouth told him how unsafe he was.

The line tautened. Judge Hawley set the reel and drew back steadily. But the line pulled back with equal steadiness and equal strength. The judge altered his grip and almost lost his rod. His hat fell off. He did not care. The rod bent and bent. He reached to release the line again, lost his footing, and plunged into the dark water of the pool.

Instantly, as at a fly flicked to the surface, the water was broken by the upward leaping of not one, but two habitants of the pool—slender and white—avid for the Judge; there was a fount of water and a tremendous threshing, and the Judge went under, washing water to all banks of the pool.

The whippoorwill, shocked at this frothing invasion of his dark domain, called once more uncertainly, and then was still.

At last, the hour being well past nine o'clock, and the Judge's car still in his yard, Whitney Featherman went out to look for

him, his bobbing lantern marking his route. He made his way up and down the brook, calling from time to time.

No answer.

He arrived finally at the Judge's hat and, fearful of what might have happened, he loped back to the house and telephoned to town.

There came then men with more lanterns, with nets and a boat or two, and this time there was no question about what must be done. Trout or no trout, Parrington's pool must be dragged, and the great hooks went into the depths.

They dragged it in the lantern-lit darkness, and by midnight brought up the rod and the line—and what the line was wrapped around—Judge Hawley, and a crush of bones tight about his throat, tight against his chest, bones still in a watersoaked, partly shredded brown coat that was Tom Boyle's old fishing jacket, by the look of it—and a belt of that coat, still fairly preserved, lined on one side with what was left of dry flies, some of them stuck like gaff-hooks into Judge Hawley—Parmachene Belles, a full dozen of them, made by Tom's hand more than a year ago.

A Gentleman from Prague

Mr. Simon Dekrugh inserted the key into the lock, turned it, and entered his house. Ah, but it was good to get in out of the rain! And it was good to be home again after that long and fatiguing trip across the Continent. The channel had been so rough, too. Having turned up the light and shed his outer clothing, Dekrugh put one of his bags up against the wall of the hall and carried the other with him into his study. He lost no time in going to the telephone.

Though the hour was late, he was put through readily enough.

"Abel? This is Simon."

"Ah, you're back? When?"

"Just now. I've something to show you. I was in Prague."

"You don't mean—not Septimus Halos'!"

"Can you run over for a bit? I daresay I shall be able to intrigue you, Abel."

"I'll be over, unless I'm caught in the fog."

"Walk in. The door is unlocked."

He walked to the bathroom and looked at himself in the glass. A little tired. Perhaps a little nervous. He had had those unaccountable impressions just before getting on the boat, and once again on the boat train from Dover. Curious! Even now he looked involuntarily over his shoulder. He had shaved that morning, and did not need to shave again.

He came out of the bathroom and turned up the radio. The B. B. C. newscaster was on the air and he stood for a moment or two listening. "Failure of the Munich Pact was forecast today by no less a personage than Mr. David Lloyd-George. The former minister represented the Pact as but a temporary stay and expressed the hope that Britain's re-armament would have proceeded to such a point by the time war actually broke out, that. . . ." He turned the dial to another station and got a re-broadcast of a symphony concert. Humming a Brahms theme, he returned to the hall, picked up the bag there, and was on his way to his room when his house-man appeared at the head of the stairs in a flood of light, having been disturbed by his coming.

"Welcome home, Mr. Dekrugh. Let me take your things, sir."

Dekrugh surrendered his bag, apologizing for having disturbed him. "How has everything been, Maxon?"

"Very good, sir. Mr. Abel Speers telephoned several times."

"I expect him."

"Shall I dress, sir?"

"No, no—go back to bed."

"Thank you, sir. I hope you had a good holiday."

"Very satisfactory, Maxon. *Very* satisfactory."

It had been, too. He returned to his study and began to open the little bag on the table; but no, not yet; let it wait until Speers got here. He sat down and drew over today's *Times*, turning, as was his invariable custom, to the letters columns, which informed him perhaps as accurately as any other source just what down-countrymen were concerning themselves about.

It was only half an hour before Mr. Abel Speers came. He had driven over himself, not trusting the Underground or the omnibuses. A fog of a sort coming up, he said. Still raining somewhat, though. Beastly night.

He was a fat, jovial man, pink with well-being.

"Have you really got it, Simon?"

Dekrugh patted the little bag on the table, and smiled.

"How in the devil did you manage?"

"Oh, it was quite simple, really," answered Dekrugh deprecatingly. "I thought the blasted Germans would be having Prague and everything in it soon enough anyway; so there was no good reason why I should not have a go at doing a little—well, what do you call it?—despoiling?"

"Grave-robbing, to put it bluntly."

Dekrugh made a grimace of distaste. "Bluntness has its place, Abel, but spare me. Let us say I decided to get a share of the spoils Chamberlain ought to have assured for us when he made up his mind to sign his name to that Munich deal."

"So then you got at Halos' grave?"

"Don't be so infernally impatient, Abel."

He turned to the bag and opened it, talking as he did so. "Anyway, it wasn't a grave—just a kind of stone coffin in that old church. Apart from the heavy lid, it did not offer too great a problem. The thing was right there in the dust and bones. I simply reached in and took it out. It's genuine twelfth century, I think, with a Latin inscription and a rather heavy gold chain."

He took out a heavy shaving kit, dumped out his razor, pried up the stiff lining, and revealed a surprisingly sizeable opening, at the moment filled with a gold chain. Dekrugh took out the chain and laid it, together with the little square of jeweled gold to which it was attached, on the table under the light.

"Gad, Simon!"

"Interesting, eh?"

"The Latin inscription seems to be clear enough. What does it say?"

Dekrugh turned the molded plaque around. "Read it for yourself. I'm a little rusty on my Humanities."

"*'What is mine, belongs to me.'* Hm!"

"Quaint, isn't it?"

The fat man's face paled a little. "I don't know that I like it, exactly."

Dekrugh laughed. "My dear fellow, I got away scot free. Not a soul suspected anything. I was quite alone in the church; the padre had gone out to get a light so that I could read the seal better . . ."

"What seal?"

Dekrugh shrugged. "I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention to the fellow when he came back and read it. I'd got what I came after, and the only reason I didn't clear out at once was to keep him from getting suspicious about my visit. The usual curse and so on—quite a few of those old religions seemed to put a lot of stock in curses. Well, I got out, nobody suspected anything wrong, luck was just with me, that's all. I got the thing hid, and not one of the customs officers guessed. And here it is."

Speers turned it over deliberately, examining it. "What the devil would Franz Verda want with it?"

"A curious piece, Abel. With a strange history."

"But the price he offered us . . ."

"Very satisfactory, eh?"

"The piece isn't worth it."

"It is to Verda." He shrugged. "The man had some motive in getting hold of it, Abel. He read about it in a book. Very well. I got hold of the book. It's the usual sort of thing—all about the piece having some psychic power for its possessor, with the appropriate mumbo-jumbo said over it. Don't expect me to argue with one of our clients. We're here to deliver the goods, not quib-

ble about what we're being paid unless the figure isn't high enough."

Speers shrugged. "That's not the trouble this time."

"Will you take it with you?"

"I'll call for it in the morning and take it down to him. Unless you'd rather. He's in Sussex just now."

"Then I'll put it away."

"Who was this fellow, anyway?"

"Septimus Halos? Oh, a priest, or something. Seventh son of a seventh son and said to have magic powers. People believed in a great deal of superstition in those days, of course. It's a wonder we've freed ourselves from most of it, even now. Verda is just one of those curious people who more than half believe a great deal of the stuff they read; only, he has money."

Speers looked around for a decanter, and Dekrugh took the hint. He went off to get something to drink, and Speers looked at the jeweled plaque again. A heavy thing to wear around one's neck. Made up like some of the pieces worn by the clergy, though; so much seemed evident. He had the sudden impulse to look over his shoulder; it was unaccountable but he could not keep from doing it. Dekrugh was just coming in with a whisky and soda.

Dekrugh laughed. "Now *you've* caught it, Abel. You've got a bad conscience—I've been catching myself doing that ever since I left Prague."

Speers laughed pointedly at the thought of Dekrugh having a conscience.

"Good Scotch, Simon."

"The best. I can afford it—even if I have to rob graves."

"Funny thing to print on that piece, though. *What is mine, belongs to me.*"

"Rather obvious, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's double-talk."

"That far back in time they had a hard enough time just talking—let alone in double talk. There's fog in your bones, Abel."

They made a little more small talk, and Abel Speers left.

Dekrugh put the treasure from Prague into a drawer of his library table, and went upstairs to bed.

At about this hour, a gentleman got off the Underground in the vicinity of St. John's Wood. He was clad in a long ulster of inconceivably ancient design, and wore a curious cocked hat. A scarf was wound around most of his face, and his eyes were concealed behind square dark spectacles. He stood on the kerb looking about him for a cab, unmindful of the rain falling around him.

"Rum go," said a fellow-traveler in the compartment he had quitted. "Smelled like something been a long time in a closet, he did."

"Soap is what he needs," said another. "Soap and water. And good plenty of it."

The rain came down desultorily, dripping from his hat, running down the cane he carried. He stood quite still, nevertheless, and when at last a cab came driving along, he raised his cane, and, when it stopped opposite him, got in.

"Where to, sir?"

After an annoying interval, he gave an address. The driver had to ask him to repeat it; the old fellow apparently had trouble articulating; he spoke with a suspiciously foreign accent. When he heard it at last, the driver shook his head.

"Oh, he ain't home, Guv'nor. Cousin of my wife's works there. He's on the Continent. Holiday."

"Drive there," said his fare.

"If you say so, Guv'nor, there you'll go. But it won't do you no good—unless he's come home tonight. I ain't seen Maxon for two, three days. Mucky night, sir."

No answer.

"Rain changing to fog, says the B. B. C. Channel fog rolling, too."

No answer.

Damned surly fare, thought the driver. He drove slowly, carefully; no use taking any risks. The distance was not great in any case. He thought of going round about by a circuitous way, but there was that about his passenger which decided him against trying any monkey business.

He got the smell of him presently and opened the side window a little, rain notwithstanding. The rain smelled like London; his fare smelled like something far away. Country-man, he thought. Old fellow up in the city for perhaps the first time in his life.

"Ever been in London before?"

No answer.

The driver grew indignant. "I say, sir—ever been in London before?"

"Yes."

"Long ago?"

"Not long."

"Queen Victoria's time," muttered the driver.

"Not long," repeated his fare in his queer, cracked voice. "Four centuries ago."

Centuries, thought the driver to himself. Centuries!—why, that's hundreds of years! The bloke's balmy. Been drinking, probably.

He drove up before the house in St. John's Wood.

"Here we are, sir."

His passenger paid him; the light was dim, but it felt like good coin of the realm. He was not niggardly, by the feel of it. He touched his hat, though at the moment, as his fare passed him, he wished to hold his nose. He smelled like something from the ground. Yes, that was it. Not clean. Like I always say, he said to himself as he got back into his cab, a man can't bet on what he can find on the streets of London these rainy nights.

The gentleman in the ulster, meanwhile, stood on the sidewalk contemplating the dark mass of the house which was the object of his visit.

As he started his cab again, the driver leaned out and called to him. "He ain't home, just like I told yer." Then he drove away.

The gentleman in the ulster was momentarily alone. But not for long.

A bobby on his round came upon him within a few moments.

"Lost, sir?" he asked.

The black spectacles looked at him.

"I say—are you off your bearings, sir?"

"The house of Mr. Simon Dekrugh," said the gentleman in the ulster.

"Right here. You've got it. Mr. Kekerugh expecting you?"

No answer.

Uncivil chap, thought the bobby. "The walk's right there." He flashed his light, and in the reflected glow saw something odd—something white where nothing white should be—between the dark spectacles and the scarf. He was oddly startled, but dismissed it as an illusion as the fellow turned his back; rain and fog played queer tricks with the eyes.

The gentleman in the ulster went up the walk, climbed the steps, and rang the bell.

Upstairs, Maxon, who had not yet got back to sleep, stirred and awakened. He lay listening. The bell rang again. He got up wearily, put on his dressing-robe and slippers, and went downstairs.

He opened the door.

"Mr. Dekrugh?"

"I'm sorry. He's sleeping. He just got home from a long trip."

"I wish to see him."

"I'm sorry. I can't wake him."

"Wake him."

Something about the gentleman on the stoop chilled Maxon. He backed into the hall; the visitor walked in.

"Wake him," he said again, planting his cane firmly on the floor.

"Whom shall I say is calling?" asked Maxon, suddenly overcome with an overpowering fright of he knew not what, a fright which, because he did not know its origin, was all the more terrifying.

"Say to him a gentleman from Prague wishes to see him."

Maxon closed the door and hurried up the stairs. He knocked on the door of Dekrugh's room. The gentleman in the hall below heard a colloquy above, and presently the door of the room was opened. There were further words.

Then Dekrugh came down the stairs, his face as cowl with anger.

"What the devil's up?" he demanded.

"I am," said the visitor.

"In this weather too, and at such an hour," growled Dekrugh.

"You should have thought of that."

"I didn't catch your name?"

"I didn't give it."

They stood facing each other, until the gentleman in the ulster shifted his cane to his left hand and extended his right.

"I have come for my property."

Dekrugh looked at the extended hand with the black glove fitting so loosely upon it; then his eyes caught sight of something that showed between the rim of the glove and the edge of the ulster, and at the same time he was aware of an overpowering charnel scent. What he saw between the glove and the ulster was bone. Nothing else.

He gasped and looked up.

The gentleman in the ulster had shaken down his scarf a little, so that Dekrugh got the full benefit of his face—what there was of it.

Dekrugh fainted.

After the silence below became intolerable, Maxon descended rather hesitantly, thinking that perhaps Dekrugh had returned to bed. But no, the light was still up, and it was not like Dekrugh to forget.

Dekrugh lay in the study. He was dead. The drawer of the library table had been torn out.

Poor Maxon! What a time he had of it. The Inspector from Scotland Yard put him through such an interrogation that he was left badly shaken. But there was that inexplicable feature of Dekrugh's death no one could explain—how a piece of bone, the terminal bone of an index finger, could have become stuck into Dekrugh's flesh at his neck, embedded in one of the marks of strangulation. For Dekrugh had been strangled, and, while the marks left on his neck suggested a pair of hands, they must have

been most peculiar hands indeed—not at all soft, but hard—hard as bone!

Scotland Yard picked up the trail of the gentleman in the ulster a block away from the house, but lost it at the Underground and did not find it again. Later on, there was a report from Dover, and eventually someone working in connection with another matter in Ostend made a routine reference to a traveler on the Berlin train resembling the gentleman in the ulster whom Scotland Yard sought. If a German agent, beyond apprehension, sorry.

Late that very night, well before any word of Dekrug's death was broadcast, Maxon's cousin's husband, quite unaware of Maxon's plight, emptied his pockets and totted up his day's take. He found in his possession a very queer coin, of a type which he had never seen before, and his father-in-law, who was a numismatist, pounced upon it with great eagerness.

"I don't know where I got it," said the younger man. "Unless maybe it was from that stinking old bloke I took around to St. John's Wood. Worth anything?"

"Worth! Coo! A small fortune! Rare as rune stone. It's a twelfth century coin from Bohemia!"

The Man on B-17

Okeh, I'll go over it again from the beginning.

The way it happened was like this. I was bringing Number Twelve down toward Hungerford; you highball from Rexford's Crossing—that's about thirty miles back—but you have to wheel in toward B-Seventeen sort of easy on account of that curve there. The trestle is on a curve, and the gorge below, with the river running deep and swift there. That night . .

No, that wasn't the night it happened. I'm telling you this because it began before that—quite a while. This was a night in the beginning of winter—maybe three months ago. Late November. Snow falling. Yes, the first night of snow. Okeh—then it was the eighteenth. I don't fix the date, but if you say that was the first night of snow, then that was it.

Well, that night I wheeled around toward B-Seventeen, and I saw this fella standing there. I thought it was Bart Hinch. Bart had a shack this side of the trestle; he walked it out of Hungerford regular about that time of night. But this guy wasn't Bart; he was a slim guy, not Bart's build much, and he was just standing there on the trestle—along about the middle. The headlight caught him, and I hit the whistle hard. I couldn't stop, and I didn't see how he was going to cut out in time. But he did it somehow. Never hit a thing, just went on smooth as you please. And then there at the other end, I could have sworn I saw a

woman, just standing there, waiting—probably for that guy on B-Seventeen.

Well, sir, that was the beginning.

After that, I saw him again. I saw him fairly regular. And one night coming down toward town, I was wheeling in extra-slow—oh, that was around Christmas; we'd had a deep snow, and it was blowing some, white gusts of snow over the trestle, and I thought I'd better take her slow around that curve; that's a tricky one—and there he was again, but closer to the end of the trestle; so I leaned out of the cab and I hollered at him.

"Light-footed?" I yelled at him.

He looked at me. I thought he smiled.

No, I couldn't be sure. The snow was blowing, and there he was standing beside the track at the bank—not two feet from the trestle; and I said to Carroll—he was in the cab with me that night—I said, "That guy's looking for trouble," I said, "and if he keeps up that way, he'll find it. Head on."

Carroll can tell you. Carroll said, "Who is he?" and I said, "Hanged if I know!"

Very next night we saw him again, Carroll and me both. This time he was square in the middle of the trestle, and I swear before God I thought we were going to hit him. I said to Carroll, "We're going to hit him!" I said, and I was bearing down on that whistle for all she had. He was there in the middle of the bridge, and the snow falling all around him. I didn't see him till just before we hit him.

At least, I thought we hit him.

We started slowing down at the other end of the trestle. No, I didn't feel a thing. Most of the time you can tell. I didn't know what to do, but then I figured it wasn't much use stopping; the snow was that thick you couldn't see anything anyway, and if we knocked him off the trestle, why, he'd be way down somewhere in

the gorge, maybe swept along in the water, God knows where. There was no use in it; we could report it in Hungerford.

No, I didn't report it. Reason was when we stopped at Hungerford, Mr. Kenyon, the conductor, came up alongside from the last coach. "You see that fellow on B-Seventeen?" he asked. I started to explain that I couldn't stop, and then I began to wonder how *he'd* seen him. I said, yes, I'd seen him, and with this and that, it came out he saw him *after* we passed over the trestle. Saw the woman, too. She was on the other side that night. Carroll's side, but Carroll wasn't looking that way. I don't know how he did it. Lightfooted is hardly the word. That bridge is narrow—narrower'n most. About the only way he could do it is to hang down off the side, and I don't know how he could do it that way that night, what with the snow and the ice underneath. Be bound to slip off and go right down. But Mr. Kenyon saw him right smack in the middle of the trestle; he must have bounced right back up from wherever he went.

"What was he doing?" I asked.

"Looked to be waiting for somebody," said Mr. Kenyon.

Well, that was the way I took it from the first. Maybe the woman. But then, the woman seemed to be waiting for someone, too. It didn't figure out right; it didn't add up. After that, I wasn't quite so nervous when I saw him again.

Sure, I saw him again. About a week later, that was. He was walking the trestle. Just walking. I saw him sort of rise up just behind the marker for the bridge—they're all numbered the way they should be and the last bridge before Hungerford is that one—B-Seventeen. He rose up and he started walking toward town. If I hadn't known better I'd have sworn that he climbed up out of the gorge along the wall there.

No, he couldn't have done it. Wall's almost sheer on that side for twenty feet or so down before it gets craggy enough to climb.

Ain't a man alive could do it on a night like that one, a winter night with snow and ice. It was like glass along that side of the gorge, and I don't see that there was any way it could be done. But as I said, there he was. I turned to Carroll and I said, "There he is again."

"Damn his eyes!" said Carroll. "Old Twelve's going to get him one of these nights."

Those were his very words. I couldn't argue with him about that. I figured then it was just a matter of time before we hit him. I didn't care how good he was at ducking out of the way. I've seen 'em beat that game just so long, and then they get caught. A train highballing along that way ain't something anybody in his right mind's going to take and fight. You can tell by the feeling you get in one of those steam-wagons, in your hands and all through you when you're pushing her down—and Number Twelve's no hay-burner, no, nor no tramp, either; Number Twelve's an old girl you can count on, a real battleship—and you get the feeling she wouldn't like it when a guy keeps daring her, and sooner or later she'd take him.

Well, it was the same that night. Saw him on the trestle, and then somehow he was on the other side; he must have run pretty fast. I opened the window and leaned out and hollered at him.

"Don't you believe in signs?" I hollered, meaning he should take notice where it says at both ends of B-Seventeen that trespassing is forbidden and so on. He didn't pay me no more attention than as if I'd been the wind. But that time I saw his face. Young fellow. Not like Bart at all. Had on a tassel-cap and a mackinaw. Looked fair—light-haired. Couldn't have weighed more'n a hundred-seventy-five. Okeh, I thought, I'll turn you in.

So I did. I waited till we hit Elroy and gave his description to the cinder-bull there, and the cinder-bull went out—it was clear that night, with a moon showing, and not cold; he went out right

away. Number Twelve's the night owl through Hungerford and Elroy. He went out that night and the next night and the next. That guy was on the trestle every night. But the cinder-bull didn't see hide nor hair of him. Or the woman, either. And she was there at least two out of those three times. Because Carroll saw her once, and I saw her the second time, and we probably just missed her the other time. She was probably there, all right, just like the other times. So the cinder-bull gave up. He wouldn't argue. "I'm the Casey Jones," I said, "and Carroll's an old raw-hider, and the ticket snatcher, Mr. Kenyon—all three of us saw him," I said. But I might as well have talked to the wind. So I ran in my report to the Super and let it go at that.

We kept on seeing him and the woman, sometimes regular, sometimes after a week or so when we didn't see either one. It went that way all through the winter. It went on that way until that night early this month, first week in March, when it happened—and since then neither of us has seen a thing, not a solitary thing.

Well, just like I said before, we bore down on B-Seventeen that night with the snow blowing thick as smoke all around us. Carroll saw him first—and he let out a yell. "There he is again!" And I looked, and sure enough—there he was, a-kneeling in the middle of the trestle. Kneeling—yes, sir! Right smack in the middle, and I knew we were going to get him, I knew the old girl was going to take and pitch him off into the gorge. I wanted to close my eyes, but I couldn't. And a good thing, maybe, I couldn't.

"Three of 'em!" Carroll hollered out.

And sure enough, there was three. That guy in the tassel-cap and the mackinaw was at this end, and the woman was at the other end. The headlight showed 'em all three just as plain. The guy in the mackinaw was braked, seemed like, to keep anyone

coming from the bridge; and the woman on the other end. She looked—well, no, I wouldn't say *mean*, just *grim*—and he looked *terrible*, like as if he was angry and cold and set to kill. The one in the middle—that one—well, we saw him before we hit him, and we knew him; that one was Bart Hinch.

We hit him. There's no more to say about that. He was there and we couldn't stop, and whatfore in God's name he was kneeling there in the middle of the trestle, praying or whatever it was he was doing, nobody'll ever know. It wasn't our fault; we couldn't throw Number Twelve off the trestle just to save him. So we hit him, and I felt it when the old girl knocked him off into the gorge, and it near made me sick to know we'd done it.

We stopped at Hungerford. That was two miles away, maybe a little better. You could see where we hit him. There was nothing we could do but report it, and let them go back, come daylight, to find what they could. . .

Sure, I talked with Bart Hinch a good many times.

No, never heard him say anything about somebody waiting for him on B-Seventeen. I don't know what he said in his cups in town, and he never said anything to me about hating to walk home at night. Could be that's how come he didn't go out much after dark, but me—I wouldn't know.

No, I never knew Tod Benning. All I know about him is that he ran off somewhere before he was to marry Lois Malone and that it killed her or she killed herself or something like that. Never heard that Bart owed him money and that he set out to collect it and never came back. Talk's cheap.

What did it look like on the trestle that night? Well, it looked to me as if the fella in the mackinaw was holding down one end of the bridge and the woman was holding down the other so's Bart couldn't get off either way. I don't care how it sounds—you

asked me, and I'm telling you. Carroll'll tell you the same thing. That's the way it looked. Sure, it was snowing. Sure, I might be mistaken. But the old girl's light cut right through that snow, and I saw those faces—and Bart Hinch's was mortal afraid, and it didn't look like he was seeing Number Twelve, either, but just those two, that fella in the mackinaw and the woman.

No, sir, we hit only once, only one thing. That was Bart Hinch. I saw it. I saw how the old girl just tossed him out of the way, out into the gorge. Then he was gone into the blackness and the snow underneath. I felt it where I sat. So did Carroll. He'll tell you the same. Only once.

How do I account for there being two bodies down there? I don't account for it. Bart was killed by Number Twelve. I said that. I saw it happen. The other one, the one you say is Tod Benning, you said yourself was dead a long time, two years or so, maybe more. I've been in Number Twelve seven years, and this is the first time we ever hit a man. Anyway, they say there's no bone broken—and the old girl would have broken him up some. So maybe he fell or was flung off the trestle—I can't say.

Yes, I can identify the man on B-Seventeen if you show him to me. Or his picture. The woman, too. It'll be the same as last time. You put those pictures down in front of me, and it'll be the same.

The man is number five, there, and the woman's number thirteen.

No mistake. At least, *I'm* not making the mistake, and Carroll's not making it. So it must be yours. If the woman's picture is one of Lois Malone—well, the woman on the trestle that night looked enough like her to be her twin sister, even if she never had one. But you don't fool me on that man, number five there. I saw him as plain as I see you, more than once. That's the man. And if you say that's a picture of Tod Benning, then that body you

drug up out of the river isn't Tod Benning's no matter what the doctor and the dentist have got to say, because that's the man Carroll and Mr. Kenyon and I saw on B-Seventeen.

That's the way it happened. Just like I've been telling you. Beginning with that night I was bringing Number Twelve around toward Hungerford and I saw this fella standing there on B-Seventeen . . .

Blessed Are the Meek

Without lifting his eyes to see, Grandpa Cowell knew that Mrs. Hassell watched him where he walked in the park with his grandson, who was her stepson. And he knew what she would be saying to Mrs. Krenet from next door. "He fills that child's head with stupid fairy tales. All day long. Something will have to be done about it." He had heard her going on like that on the telephone, and no doubt she did it elsewhere. If only Ralph had not married her after his first wife's death! And, since he had done so, if only he had remained alive to control his household!

Kenneth pulled at his hand, and he looked into the boy's wide blue eyes. "Grampa, what are those?" He pointed into the fountain pool.

"Those are goldfish, Kennie."

"What are goldfish, Grampa?"

"Goldfish are carp." Somehow, this did not sound adequate. He went on. "Goldfish are really carp, but down underneath once upon a time they were something else. They were just carp like all the other carp, but one day they got together and they decided they didn't like being like all the others. They wanted to be a special kind of carp. So they asked God to change them somehow and make them different. God said he would, but if he gave them beautiful colors, he'd make them smaller. That was God's way of evening things up, and he did it. That's how come

goldfish are so pretty to look at, but their big cousins, the carps, are homely."

Kenneth looked longingly at the goldfish, trying to imagine them asking God to change their colors. "Wish I was a goldfish," he said. "Then I could swim under water all day."

"But then you couldn't walk, and you wouldn't like that, would you, Kennie?"

"No, Grampa."

"Now then, who wants to be a goldfish and have people looking at you all day?"

"I guess I don't, Grampa."

"We'd better go home, Kennie."

"Aw, do we have to?"

"I guess we do."

Kenneth was reluctant, but the old man was firm. Grandpa Cowell whirled his cane several times, harrumphed twice, and set off. Kenneth pulled back. Grandpa Cowell let go his hand and said cheerfully, "Well, goodbye then, Kennie!" and went off alone.

"You wait for me, Grampa!" cried Kenneth in shrill alarm, and ran after him.

They walked across the park and the street to the house. Mrs. Hassell stood waiting, her hard, sharp eyes peering at them from between narrowed lids, her thin-lipped mouth an uncompromising slit.

"You're late, Mr. Cowell."

"Are we, Harriet?"

"You know you are. You're always late. If you're too lazy to take out your watch and look at it, then you're ready for a 'home'."

"Well, I'm sorry, Harriet."

"Oh, yes, you're sorry," she mocked him and strode off ahead

of him, without a glance for the boy. Her mumbled words came floating back, "Filling his head full of nonsense! What would Ralph think, I wonder! Or his mother, either, if she were alive!"

Kenneth tugged at Grandpa Cowell's hand, indicating that he should bend down. Grandpa Cowell obligingly did so. Kenneth **seized his ear and whispered.**

"I don't like her," he said vehemently.

"Tch, tch!" clucked Grandpa Cowell.

After Kenneth had been put to bed, Grandpa Cowell sat alone, **waiting.**

Every night the old man waited. He had come to know what to expect. There would be a few minutes of blessed peace, while the twilight explored the park across the street, and Mrs. Hassell gave directions for tomorrow's meals to the cook in the kitchen; then Mrs. Hassell would come in and begin to talk. It was almost always the same, and tonight she came earlier than usual.

"Grandpa Cowell, what kind of rigmarole did you tell him to-day?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," he said meekly. It was no good fighting in a household; that made for bitterness and lifelong enmity, and even if he did not live entirely on her charity, he was in a sense dependent upon her to be near Kenneth.

"You'll just have to stop it, do you hear? What's to become of that boy?"

"I do my best to teach him things," he said quietly.

"Ha! and what things! Indeed!" She scoffed. "And what do you intend to do with him tomorrow when I have my Club?"

"I thought, if you wouldn't mind, we'd walk down to the sea-shore."

"Mind? Of course I mind, but what can I do about it?"

Nag, he said in his mind's channels. Nag and scold. He retreated to the Bible, reading wherever he chanced to open the book. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," he read. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the land. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall have their fill. . . ."

Bright and early next morning, Grandpa Cowell and Kenneth left the house, carrying their lunch. They took a street-car and rode for blocks and blocks, until they came to where they could walk down to the seashore. It was a warm day, but not hot; a breeze blew in off the ocean, the water was cobalt, and the air that came in was fresh. It was a wonderful day for an outing, and Kenneth was in high spirits.

By noon the old man was almost exhausted. Though he was neither too old nor physically decayed, he was past the age at which he could readily work; but he was no longer so hale that he could easily withstand the tempestuous demands made upon him by a five-year old. He was grateful for the chance to sit down in the shade back from the water's edge and eat the lunch they had brought.

For Kenneth, however, there was no rest. He was finished long before Grandpa Cowell, and was off to the water's edge again, running along it like the wind. The old man watched him anxiously. Now and then the boy stopped and picked up something, examined it, threw it away, but at last he found something that seized hold of his fancy, and came running back with it, thrusting it at the old man.

"Grampa, what's this?"

Grandpa Cowell took it and looked at it judiciously. It was a

curiously-wrought bottle of dark green glass, quite opaque, with some kind of script worked into the glass. It looked Arabic. It had a heavy silver seal. From its appearance, it must have floated in, neck down; so it must be empty, for the seal would not otherwise have overbalanced a filled bottle. It was beautiful in the sunlight, giving off an iridescent sheen.

"What is it, Grampa?"

"Sit down, Kennie," said Grandpa Cowell gravely. "This is a wonderful bottle," he continued. "This is a bottle from far, far away, and I think it's got a djinn in it."

"What's a djinn?"

"A djinn is something like a big overgrown boy who doesn't behave. So when they catch him, a magician makes him small and puts him into this bottle, and there he has to stay until somebody lets him out. And when he's let out, he gives a wish to the one who lets him out."

Kenneth looked dubiously at the bottle. "He isn't very heavy, is he?"

"Oh, no. When he's been in the bottle for a while, he gets as light as smoke. In fact, he looks just like a puff of smoke."

"He does?" He peered wide-eyed at the bottle. "But I don't see any smoke in there, Grampa."

"I know. You can't see anything. The glass can't be looked through. That's so nobody will open it and let him out."

"Was he real bad?"

"Oh, very bad! He certainly was."

"Was he as big as me, Grampa?"

"Maybe he was. But thinner, I suspect."

Kenneth was enchanted. He kept the bottle with him all afternoon and clung tenaciously to it all the way home on the street-car. He burst into the house with it, eager to show it to his step-mother.

"See! See, Mama, what I got!"

"Where did you get that?"

"Out of the ocean."

"Well, throw it away. Your grandfather ought to know better than to let you lug home stuff like that." She glared accusingly at the old man, who smiled shyly.

He hugged it to his breast, crying, "No, no!"

"You'll do as I say, Kenneth!" She bore down upon him, her mouth working, but the old man interposed himself.

"Now, now, we can do that tomorrow. I promised him we'd open it. Then we can throw it away, can't we, Kennie?"

"Open it first?" asked Kenneth dubiously.

"Tomorrow morning, yes, sir!"

Mrs. Hassell stood angrily gazing at him. "Two people can't raise that child, Mr. Cowell."

"Some children need a man as well as a woman," he said mildly.

That night Grandpa Cowell did not know half the time whether he slept or woke. He had waited before going to bed until Kenneth was sound asleep; then he had gone into the boy's room and taken the bottle from him, lest Mrs. Hassell take it and destroy it in the night. He put it safely under his pillow, but somehow it made an unpleasant unevenness under his head, and he was a long time getting to sleep.

Then, at the edge of sleep, he was awakened by an imperative voice crying out, "Sir!"

He sat up, mumbling and rubbing his head, yawned once or twice, and stretched out again. He closed his eyes.

"Sir!" he heard again.

This time he did not stir. After all, there were all manner of sounds in the night. Street-cars clanged past, once a fire-truck went by, sirens screaming, cars went up and down, and not too

far away the elevated trains roared through from the suburbs. He counted sheep, but very soon it was not sheep but strange little dark-skinned men, glaring angrily at him over the stile they were crossing, gaunt, hungry-looking creatures. After a while they were not men at all, but only beings in the shape of men, all looking alike as peas in a pod. He counted one hundred and seventy-one of them, identical even to the loin-cloth and turbans they wore. It was curious, he thought drowsily, how all of them wished earnestly to speak to him, for each of them addressed him with a peremptory "Sir!" as he crossed the stile.

The little dark man was omnipresent, and his commanding, "Sir!" rang in his ears.

But he slept. Or did he sleep, indeed? For there was that little dark man peering at him through a thick green wall and demanding his freedom. "Let me out, and you shall have your wish!" he said, over and over. And then again, "Sir! Free me; I will make you rich; I will make you happy. Let me out!"

Grandpa Cowell woke up, rubbing his head. He sighed, reached under his pillow, and put the green bottle from the sea under his bed, and groaning, lay down once more. This time there was no doubt about it—he could sleep; he was confident of it. The little dark man was there still, but he was far away, much farther, and his imperative "Sir!" was just a whisper on the edge of his consciousness. There was still, however, an illusion in his mind's eye, showing the little dark man once small, once large and billowing as a cloud, with a turban and a sword, with anger flashing in his eyes. But this passed, and the cuckoo clock downstairs said two o'clock pipingly, and Grandpa Cowell slept, rueing the tale told Kenneth.

Before she left for a shopping trip along Fifth Avenue next morning, Mrs. Hassell delivered her ultimatum to Grandpa Cow-

ell. "If that bottle isn't out of this house and out of that child's life when I come home, I'll have something to say to you. Djinn, indeed! He told me all about it last night. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Grandpa Cowell looked at Kenneth as if he had betrayed him.

Kenneth was blissfully unaware of the old man's hurt, since he had discovered his precious bottle still in his bed, where the old man had put it on rising, and now looked forward to its opening.

"Now, Grampa, now!" he begged.

"Not till after breakfast. Eat your cereal!"

"I don't like that old cereal."

"You just eat it. There's lots of things we don't like, but we'd better eat them just the same. It's good for you."

Kenneth obeyed, lured by the magic of the bottle.

After breakfast they sat down together on the back porch where the ash tree offered shade from the sun's heat, the bottle between them.

"We have to make a wish," said Grandpa Cowell.

"You make it, Grampa."

"What would you like, Kennie? It's your bottle. You found it."

Kenneth danced up and down. "Hurry up and open it, Grampa. You wish."

"What shall I wish?" He worked at the bottle. "Hurry up and tell me, because we have to make the wish right after we open the bottle."

"I know, Grampa. Wish for him to take Mama away."

Grandpa Cowell smiled benignly. "All right, Kennie. That's just what we'll do. Of course, we won't ever know, because she'll probably be back in time for supper, when she said she would come."

"No, no—for good. Wish it for good!"

The bottle came open at last. As he withdrew the leaden cork,

a puff of dust billowed out and curled over the neck of the bottle.

"There! There he is!" screamed Kenneth, excitedly. "Hurry up, Grampa, or he'll get away."

"I wish the djinn would take Mrs. Hassell far away and never let her come back again," said Grandpa Cowell gravely. "So there, that's done!" he added, with a twinkle in his eyes.

The dust rose high up, flattened into a cloud, and vanished in the wind still blowing off the ocean.

"And now, Grampa," said Kenneth solemnly, taking up the bottle, "we'll have a funeral for the bottle. You be the preacher, and I'll be the burier."

"All right," said Grandpa Cowell cheerfully.

"You lead the way. That's what the preacher always has to do!"

Grandpa Cowell folded his hands and marched down the steps of the porch for all the world like a minister about to conduct services for the departed.

Mrs. Hassell never did come home.

The supper hour came and went, and there was no Mrs. Hassell. Kenneth's bedtime came, and still no Mrs. Hassell. By morning, Grandpa Cowell called the police, and they asked a lot of questions.

If Grandpa Cowell had subscribed to the *World*, he might have seen a curious story about the arrest of one Herbert Minshall, who had at first been charged with intoxication, but had subsequently been released for lack of evidence. He had belabored a policeman on upper Fifth with an hysterical tale of seeing a woman whisked up off the street in a cloud of dust or smoke, and carried right on out of the canyon of Fifth Avenue into the blue, dwindling to a speck in heaven, and finally to nothing. "What an

imagination!" said a hundred thousand readers of the *World*. "Herbert Minshall, hysteric," said the police blotter. "Discharged for lack of evidence to sustain charge of intoxication. Probably schizophrenic."

Grandpa Cowell was puzzled for a long time, but eventually he recovered sufficiently to take pleasure in his new-found freedom, particularly since it became increasingly evident day after day that Mrs. Hassell, wherever she was, had no intention of coming home, and since he had tired quickly of making the rounds of hospitals and morgues to look at unidentified women in their middle thirties.

As for Kenneth, he could not understand Grandpa Cowell's perplexity. He knew very well what had happened to his step-mother. In his own small primitive way, he celebrated the event by disinterring the green bottle, setting it up on his bureau, and making daily offerings to it, in sincere tribute.

Mara

I had somehow supposed that my old friends would be satisfied to forget me in the face of my indifference to their letters, and yet perhaps that was taking too much for granted. Certainly you, above all, ought to have some kind of explanation, and, knowing me, you know I am not given to inventing things, I must tell the truth or nothing, and in this case the truth is not easily told. I hope you will believe me. I know I would not even now be writing to you if it were not for your insistent letter threatening to come to see me. Because I do not want you to come. Please believe that it is not out of any animosity that I ask it; I have only the fondest memories of you, and in other circumstances I would like nothing better than to see you, but no, no, it is impossible, it is better this way, just left without seeing each other again.

But I know too I cannot ask this of you without telling you how it is with me. I can tell you easier than I could tell anyone else; you have known me better, perhaps as well as any one man can come to know another. But no one person ever gets to know any other completely; you understand how that is, of course; we are all creatures of a thousand impulses springing from unknown pasts, from forces beyond our control, as it were, and none of us is so much given to habit that he is always perfectly predictable. You will say that this is a preface leading up to something, and you will be right, as always; such it is. It is in a way a preface to confession, for in this case the confession must come before what

else I have to tell you, because without it, you would not quite "see" the aftermath.

I shall not trouble to delay any longer, for this letter is likely to be long enough without involved explanations; and if I do seem to wander a little, do bear with me, and, above all, do—I beg of you—do understand that the man who is writing to you is the same man you always knew, except in one particular—he has allowed to fall away all those masks with which each of us protects himself from the world each time he is not alone. And because I am tired I do not want to put them on any more.

It begins, then, a long time ago—more than a decade ago, just after I had built my house, this house, on the edge of Waterbury, across from the mountain. You will remember how everyone said that it was a shame for a young bachelor in his early thirties to have such a fine house all by himself, and all the usual remarks about my having got the "nest" and now to hurry and get the "bird". What you did not know perhaps was that I was not living in this house alone. I know that you saw Mara at least once when you were here; she was then a stenographer, and you said that she was pretty, and I answered that perhaps she was, and you said something about my being too much alone, and lonely, and you said too I had ought to think of getting married and settling down. I remember all this so clearly because, you see, it all began immediately after. It began one night when I worked late with Mara; I was tired and I suspect I was dissatisfied with what I had written. That night Mara came to my room and came into my bed and put her arms around me. "You are lonely," she said. "Yes," I said. And I was—terribly lonely. . . .

I should tell you this about Mara before anything more—she was amoral, very amoral. She did not come to me at first because she loved me, but I think later, in her own way, she did come to love me, and for a long time I was very happy with her. I know

you may be unpleasantly surprised to learn this, because both Mara and I wore our masks well, people never suspected anything. Perhaps it was because Mara was "socially" beneath me—for whatever such distinctions may mean. I gave her money for many things, but never too much at any one time, and she dressed well, she always looked very beautiful, and, yes, surely, in her own way she was beautiful, because—there is no longer any reason why I should try to conceal it—I loved her.

Perhaps it was absurd that someone in my position should fall in love with a girl like Mara—because she was, after all, hardly more than that. Twenty, I think. But there was something inside me that made love impossible for any time, except under my own conditions; no one could judge me any more harshly than I long ago judged myself; but I cannot help it. I have always been terribly proud—not of anything I have done; there is nothing in that—but just proud with a kind of personal integrity, that same integrity which has always made it impossible for me to lie, even to tell a "white lie".

So, you see, it was natural that that pride would some day clash with the emotion I felt for Mara. Perhaps after all I did not love her with a love overpowering enough to conquer all, for I wanted to marry her eventually, I wanted her to be someone I need not fear for in the company of my friends, and to that end I was teaching her little things—oh, so many things she would need to know to prevent herself from being trapped by the wives of some of my friends, who would enjoy exposing her to their merciless cruelty. You know how women can be; I do not need to tell you.

But I am digressing; forgive me. I lived with Mara as man and wife, in all but legal fact, for six months, when she was unfaithful to me with the young man who drove my car for me;

and, in short, she was pregnant by him. I cannot explain to you how I felt; she had no feeling for him at all; she had no explanation except that she had impulsively wanted him and had taken **him in her amorality.**

There is nothing to be gained in expanding my story at this point. I did what I could for her, I gave her money to have the baby, I told her she must marry Arthur, but I made it clear that I could not keep either of them there. So they were married and they went away, and afterward there came her heartbreaking letters, tender with love, wretched with longing for this house to which she had become so attached, and filled with her misery with Arthur, who did not love her and could not. After the baby was born prematurely, and died, she drowned herself in the river that flowed past the house where she lived.

That is Mara's story.

Pride kept me from her when she asked to see me, and her death was so great a shock to me that I closed this house and went away, at first to Europe, and then to Asia. I forgot her there, if I could not forget how she had been. You must understand that I am writing this to you fully conscious of how ridiculous it looks in black on white, how incredible it must seem to you that someone like myself could become so attached to a girl like Mara, who you once called a "baggage", a description with which I am not disposed to take issue. But love her I did. And who can say what love is? I assure you, I would not attempt to do so. And I loved her with even more passion for a long time after she had gone away from me than before, however paradoxical that may be. You may well say that this was but the manifestation of a driving ego deprived of something which, however obscurely, flattered it; but I think that is too simple a pattern to explain it.

However, that is not in issue. I am not writing this to offer any

kind of apology or even of explanation beyond that I think you are entitled to have; while I hope that you have enough regard for me left to accept what I have to say without question, I must be honest and admit that it is a matter of complete indifference to me whether or not you believe me, just so long as you do not trouble on my account and thus add to my problems, or disturb my way of living—which is not conducive to guests.

I think you will agree that when you saw me in New York after I had landed from abroad I did not seem to you any different from the man who went away, save that I had grown a little older, into my forties. I am still in a large sense of the word unchanged. But what has happened to me was unforeseen. From the time I left New York to re-open my house here, until now, unaccountable events have taken place. I use that word "unaccountable" advisedly; at first, you see, I wanted to account for them, but now it does not matter, believe me—I accept them.

It began with little things.

You know how a house that has been long shut up feels? Stuffy and musty, a little damp, sometimes mildewed or mouldy, and dusty—it has a feeling of being deserted. When I walked into my house, it felt clean, fresh—not at all shut up. I know Blenner had opened the house when he got my wire, but it was more than that; the house was just as if it had never been left to stand untenanted. It is difficult to explain just exactly what I mean; but the house had a feeling of having been lived in without interruption. It had a warmth about it, and it was a feminine warmth. Yet, you know, it had been empty.

Well, that was the first thing—not much in itself, you will agree.

But the feeling persisted. And then there were other things, each of them almost infinitesimal in itself. When I put it all down on paper like this the immensity of the absurdity of trying to

make it come clear for someone else appals me; but I have begun, and I will carry on to the end of it. I cannot begin to detail everything that happened. But there were times when, for instance, I *knew* no one could possibly have been in the house, and yet things were done: the dust taken up, chairs and things put to rights, dishes washed and put away. I know how patently ridiculous it sounds, but I assure you no person could have got into my house, yet these things were done.

And sometimes they were done while I was in the house.

One night, after I had had a light lunch, I was too tired to clean the dishes; so I went up to my room and got ready for bed. The dishes could always be done by Mrs. Janney, who does for me during the day, but leaves directly after my evening meal. But I had hardly begun to undress when I heard the sound of dishes. It was uncanny, and it was impossible. And yet, when I went downstairs finally, the dishes had been washed and put away; an ash-tray I had used had been emptied and cleaned. I cannot describe to you how I felt. You have always known me for a skeptic in all things which have no ready scientific explanation; but I assure you most solemnly that everything else was as I had left it—door and windows locked, for instance, from the inside, and nothing at all to show that anyone had been in my kitchen—except for the undeniable fact that the dishes had been cleaned and put away.

I could recount a score of such instances. In the end I had to admit to myself that somehow, somewhere, someone beside myself was in my house. External evidence suggested that it was a woman.

You know, of course, that I would do everything possible to ascertain her identity; and I did. At first I was given to searching the house; I did it repeatedly and assiduously; I did it even when I knew beyond doubt that there was no one in the house but my-

self. I assure you that a man like myself, facing the unknown, perhaps the unknowable, does not readily concede even the plain facts beyond any question; and I did not. I could not, of course, deny that certain things happened in my house, but I refused to acknowledge that these things were not the work of human hands.

You must understand, of course, that they were not.

I know how it sounds, but I say to you most solemnly that I am in no sense of the word deranged. But I learned about my invisible companion one night when I came in after a little card party—a party, I hasten to assure you, at which nothing more potent than a mild punch was drunk. I say this to forestall what might otherwise be your instant reaction—for which, certainly, I could not blame you.

I came into my house at or near midnight—it does not really matter which, does it? It was at night, by moonlight—a full moon shone, and you know how the mountain looks under the moon, you have seen it; it is important that you call it back to mind, because it was that—the way the mountain looks from my bedroom window, the big, double window with the low seat at its sill—it was that which was responsible for what happened. Because when I went into the house, I did not put on a light; I did not want to destroy the illusory magic of the moonlight; you can understand this, I know; I need not dwell upon it. I wanted, you see, to look out of my dark bedroom upon the mountain under the moon; so I made my way up the stairs in the dark, knowing my way very well, naturally, and I went into my room.

There was the mountain—rising like something from another world into that sky of moonlight and far stars, with the dark fragile limbs of weeping willow making it to seem like an Oriental Print—and there was something else. It took me a full minute to understand what it was—at first a kind of shimmering, literally,

as if the moonlight reflected from something there among the cushions of that window-seat. But it was not a shimmering in reality; it was a strange, lovely quality of moonlight which had been taken in by something there, a kind of iridescence, as of moonlight permeating something—something that had no substance and yet seemed to have body. And then I saw—I saw a woman there among my cushions, a beautiful young woman with the moonlight glowing from her hair and her features. I saw her as clearly as I saw the mountain and the willow and the window-frame, like something belonging to moonlight and the night, like the moonlight itself. And then I did not see her; there was nothing but the moonlight there, nothing . .

So you see, I knew at last why it was that things happened in my house. I was not alone, after all. I shared the house with a ghost—and a ghost who had perhaps as much right here as I. For I saw her so clearly that there could be no doubt; only a fool would doubt any longer—and I am not that, whatever my flaws. I saw her so clearly that the sight of her sent a sharp icicle of anguish through me, and I called out her name.

"Mara!" I cried.

But there was no answer. And in an instant everything pent up inside me burst forth. I was like a madman, I know. Everything I had forced down and held back, everything my pride would not permit me to admit even to myself surged up, and I knew, that had I to do it over again, I would have died for Mara if that would have meant her happiness. I loved her, and despite what she had done, she loved me; in that instant I admitted shamelessly what I had not dared to admit before—that I would never love anyone else as I had loved Mara and as I still loved her in the fastnesses of my heart.

I waited half of what remained of the night for sight of her

again, but there was nothing—nothing but moonlight in the room, and the tangibility of memory. But once—just once, I thought I felt someone's touch. Nothing more than that.

In the morning I tried to rationalize what had happened. Hallucination, dream—everything possible occurred to me; but I knew there was no other explanation. Yet I knew, too, that Mara was dead; I knew where she had been buried; I knew that little remained of what had once been that beautiful body. I knew all this, I say—and yet I knew I had seen Mara in my room in the night, and nothing—*nothing* could shake that conviction. There was no rationalization possible; you cannot rationalize the truth out of existence. What is my concern, after all, with the academic arguments about the possibility of spectral images? And what does it matter by what name they are called, or by what means they come into being or seem to come into being? It does not matter at all, really. I know what I saw, I know what I experienced, I know that I continue to live and to work unchanged in any particular for having had that experience and those experiences which came after.

All that day I thought about Mara. You must understand that on the night I first saw her I had not been thinking of her at all. It would be idle to deny that I had thought of her from time to time; I would not attempt to do so. As I have said, it does not make any material difference what people think, in belief or disbelief. It would be only natural to think of Mara now and then—you cannot live in a house where you have spent as many happy hours as I spent with Mara during that short half year without filling every corner of it, by day and by night, (and you know the corners in a house are different by night), with little memories, so that the smallest things, like a patch of sunlight on the rug, a bluebird's song outside the window, the singing of a teakettle—these trivial things bring back sometimes the warmest, the rich-

est memories. And, in essence, it is these little things which are life, for the major events of life happen only once, but the little things are its very fabric.

That night I had another engagement, once more to play cards. Try to imagine how I felt—playing cards, but wondering whether I would see her again, saying all the casual little things about hands and bids and scores, and inside thinking always, consciously, "Mara! Mara! Mara!", and thinking too, quite objectively, or myself playing with such aplomb, of a man who had seen a ghost within the past twenty-four hours, and who might see her again—nay, hoped that he might see her again, soon, very soon—and thinking to ask myself whether there might be any outward sign of what might seem to others my deterioration. You see, however much I could not believe in that as an explanation, I had to consider it, to be perfectly honest with myself.

Once again, that night, I went into my house in the darkness, I went up to my room, and there she was—not this time in the window-seat, this time lying on my bed. Her eyes were closed; she appeared to be sleeping. Her breasts rose and fell regularly, as if she breathed, and she seemed to have substance. For what must have been a long time I stood looking at her, marking every feature—even to the little mole behind her left ear, for the moonlight lay across her and the bed, and the room was suffused by direct and reflected moonlight. It was Mara—how could I have questioned it even for a moment! Hardly daring to breathe, I looked upon her as so often I had seen her—here, in this room, this bed, and it seemed to me that I could hear her say again, as on that first night, "You are lonely!" And I knew I was—terribly lonely . . .

I walked silently over. I bent above her and tried to touch her. I could not—and yet I did touch her. Can you understand? I mean that I did not touch someone of flesh and blood, but there was

something, something soft, yielding, cool but not cold. And I whispered, "Mara?"

I heard her answer—the same voice, the same inflection as always. "Yes?" she said, as if just half awake—and then she was gone; and though I called out her name again and again, there was nothing more, there was never any answer.

I could not sleep. I lay waiting, waiting—while the moon swung around and the sun began to lighten the east; but there was nothing, no one, the room was cold and alone and empty of anyone but me.

After that I waited constantly. Sometimes I went out for a short walk deliberately, and came back to my house in the darkness, and went up to my room in the darkness, hoping to find her there, but she was not there. Yet things happened as always in that house, as if she were mistress there—never so that Mrs. Janney noticed anything, of course—but with an almost precise regularity. Oh, there were some days when I thought my reason would give under the intensity of wanting to see her, wanting to hear her voice again, yes, wanting to go back ten years and start over . . . Do try to understand how that can be, and understand too that I have always been lonely, not in the sense of being alone, but in that wider meaning we comprehend by such a term a *Weltschmerz*, for instance, or *Sehnsucht*—the Germans in this regard seem to have more definitive, less all-inclusive words than we.

And then, perhaps three weeks later, I woke in the night, and I knew I was not alone. I knew without seeing, without turning to look, for the room was dark with that other-world darkness of the earliest hours of morning, just past midnight. I knew she was there, I felt her there beside me.

"Mara," I whispered.

"You are lonely," she said.

"Yes, oh yes," I answered her.

And then I felt her like someone alive, I felt her arms go around me and I felt her lips, just as it had always been during those wonderful months with her . .

Afterwards I asked her how long she had been in this house.

"I have never been away, except for that little time you sent me away," she said. "You were gone so long."

I told her I loved her.

"I know," she said. "I knew how lonely you were; I felt it—so I came back to wait for you here."

And then, "Promise me you will never go away from me again."

I assure you, I never found any promise easier to make.

After that she was with me every night, and sometimes even in the daytime I caught glimpses of her—doing things around the house. I know how fantastic it must seem, but do believe me when I say that we never lived more like man and wife before than we have lived since then—than we are living now.

But you see, surely, that it is not a life we can share—even with so old a friend as you.

And you can understand why I cannot leave Mara ever again.

For, if I left her, what would become of her? Who would take care of her? You see, I love her—and to everyone else she is dead—dead almost ten years . .

And, if I were to lose her again, what would happen to me?

You see, these are questions to which there are no adequate answers.

There is really nothing more for me to say, nothing . . .

The Blue Spectacles

When he reached Cartagena, Jesse Brennan knew that his traveling was done. He was old, he was tired, and his illness had finally become too burdensome; he could not go on. A doctor confirmed it: he had perhaps a month to live, perhaps not that. Cartagena was sunny and warm; the Atlantic shone cobalt from dawn to dusk; the ancient walls of the old Colombian city pleased him. He had done more than one man's share of exploring, of poking about in the old places and the odd corners of the earth; he had no one to mourn him but a few old friends scattered over the globe; he might as well die in Cartagena as anywhere. Back home in the United States it would be winter now, and he had no taste for winter—better the sun and the cloudless sky and the restless sea.

There remained the problem of disposing of those trifles he had collected—the things of value to fellow collectors. He set about this without delay, so that the burden of thinking about this final task might not cloud his last days. The stone clock of mysterious Indian origin could go to Faulkner in Cairo. Stuart could have the old German book bound in human skin. Rawlings, a hermit in his Edinburgh garret, would enjoy the curious figurines from Burma, and Vaclav would find Prague more interesting if he were the possessor of the Borgia ring. But to whom to send the blue spectacles? Ah, that was a problem! The old Chinese mandarin from whom he had got them had been convincingly solemn about the wonderful properties of the spectacles.

Where, he wondered, could he find a man whose soul was "untouched" by sin, lest, by gazing through the blue glass something should befall him?

He thought about the disposal of the blue spectacles for two days. After he had packed and shipped everything else, the spectacles remained. But then, in the night, under a guileless moon, it came to him: Alain Verneil, of course! Too honest for his own good, too sincere to recognize hypocrisy, faithful, dogged, moral—yes, the blue spectacles would be safe with him, if indeed they had any of the properties attributed to them. He did not remember Verneil's address, nor could he find it anywhere in his things, but Verneil had been curator of some sort of museum in New Orleans, and he would doubtless be in the directory; so he did up the spectacles in a compact box, wrote a letter to enclose with his gift—"I got these from an old Chinese in Tibet. How old they are I don't know; he didn't know, either. They are said to be magic, in a peculiar way. If anyone who is not wholly good looks through them something will happen to him—I gather that he will be given sight of himself in some previous incarnation or time or something of that sort, and that it will not be pleasant. Or a change of identity in which punishment shall fit his crimes—you know how these legends go. I am almost ashamed to confess that the old fellow was so convincing that I myself never wore them. I was never 'good', much less 'wholly good', and at this stage there is hardly any use lying about that, is there?"—addressed it to Alain Verneil, New Orleans, Louisiana, U. S. A., scrawled across one corner of the package, "Directory Service, Please," and dispatched it.

He put no return address on it, because Verneil would recognize the "Jesse" who had signed the letter. In any case, it did not matter; he was dead before the little package reached New Orleans.

It came into the city on the first day of the annual Mardi Gras, and, being marked for directory service, it was passed along to the proper quarters, where a much-harassed clerk, wishing her day over and her work done—though there were hours yet to pass—received it among other pieces of mail similarly marked. All in good time she came to the package from Cartagena, noticing the stamps first, and thinking of her niece's stamp collection. Being constantly subject to all kinds of script, she had developed some facility in reading the scrawls that passed beneath her eye. But Jesse Brennan's script, while superficially legible, tended toward carelessness, so that his i's were dot-less, and many of his consonants run together, with the result that, shifting her eyes from the stamps to the address she must service, she read it at once: Alan Verneul—and why should she not, when one of Alan Verneul's most spectacular divorce cases had been won that day, and his name was everywhere from the *Globe* to the *Picayune*? And who, but somebody in Colombia, would not know his address? She added it to Brennan's script, and sent the package on its way.

At the moment of its arrival, Alan Verneul was at the telephone. Where was the domino he had ordered? He knew it should be in his hands; indeed, it should have awaited him on his return from court, but, though his costume and everything else was in perfect readiness, there was no domino. And none other to be had, admitted his costumer reluctantly. Verneul's first thought, therefore, at the arrival of the package, was that the missing domino had turned up, though it was long since in the hands of a black roisterer, who had found it where it had been lost out of the package from the costumer's.

But sight of the stamps disillusioned him. Nevertheless, he opened it, wondering whom he knew in Cartagena, where he had

never been. He looked first at the signature. Perhaps Jesse Melanchton, who had gone to South America somewhere after his day in court. The letter puzzled him. He misread its salutation, which, characteristically, Brennan had written so that it might have been Alan, Alain, or Allen; he had no reason to feel that any error had been made. Still, Melanchton was likely to remember the address of his apartment.

He came at last to the spectacles.

Even he could recognize their age—it needed no explanation, such as was in the letter, for the glass in the spectacles was a strange cloudy blue, a kind of smoky blue the like of which he had never seen before; and their frame was evidently hand-wrought, of silver. He put them down on his dressing-table and read the letter once more. A curious thing, certainly. Whoever Jesse was, he was a superstitious man just as certainly.

He brushed the letter and the wrapping of the package to one side, and was about to lay the spectacles away when a thought struck him. He looked at the spectacles once again. They were large, square; they had but a narrow bridge, and were thickly-framed. Awkward thing to wear, no doubt, but in the circumstances, quite proper. They were not out of character, since Verneul was about to join the maskers in the costume of a New Orleans dandy of more than a century ago, and the blue spectacles would do very well indeed in place of the missing domino.

He carried them to a mirror and put them on. He could not have devised a better concealment for his eyes, for he could see through them very well, but none could see his eyes behind them.

There were reasons why he would not like to be known behind his mask. There were irate husbands and equally irate fathers, some of whom had threatened him with various degrees of dire punishment. Moreover, as a divorce lawyer, he entertained many feminine clients, who, if they were not guilty of

adultery when they came to him, were guilty at leaving, Verneul having a facility for exacting fees in coin other than money. His success in court bred envy and contempt; his success with the ladies bred hatred and jealousy. But his boldness knew no end, and his self-assurance never faced retreat.

He got dressed, went outside, and took a cab to where the roistering crowds were gay along the streets. There he left the cab and mixed among them: tall, saturnine, handsome, still young at forty and attractive. Secure before his roving eyes, he wore the blue spectacles.

He had taken part in the Mardi Gras many times before. It was no novelty to him, and he had not come particularly to enjoy the celebrants or even to watch the parades and the floats; his role was predatory, and his eyes darted hither and yon in search of likely women who might be unable to resist his charms. He walked leisurely about; now that he was in the midst of the celebrants, he had ample time at his disposal, and there was no need to hasten. There were hours yet before he need make his choice among the masked women who danced all around him.

He had not gone far, however, before he reflected that he had never seen the crowds quite so riotous and gay, and, thinking thus, he chanced to look up to see where he was. After a moment of puzzled gazing, here and there, he had to admit to himself that he did not know; somehow, he had wandered into a section of the city completely strange to him, despite certain similarities in old gables and corners. Observing this, he stood quite still and scrutinized his surroundings with his practised legal eye. During the interval of his examination, he saw surprising things abounding.

There were no street-lamps of any kind.

There was no modern vehicle in sight for as far as he could see, even such floats as were there being horse-drawn.

The hour being close to twilight, many of the roisterers carried crude, home-made torches, while others carried lanterns of a decidedly old-fashioned kind.

He noticed these facts with mounting amazement, but he had no time to speculate on them, for at the moment he felt the tap of a fan on his shoulder, and, turning, found himself looking into the eyes of a strikingly beautiful girl, momentarily raising her mask so that he might see her.

"I've been looking for you," she said, mysteriously.

"Have you?" he answered for lack of anything else to say.

"You're late."

"I came as soon as I could," he answered, determined to play her game.

How beautiful she was! Creole, he thought—certainly of mixed blood somewhere in her background. With black eyes like something alive and fathomless as a distant sea, soft, velvety skin, long, slender hands. Even in the ruffled and bustled costume she wore it was possible to recognize that her figure was superb. He forgot about the strangeness of the street on which they stood.

"Come," she said, and began to move swiftly away from him, darting in and out among the crowds.

His pulse quickened. "Wait for me," he called after her.

She turned her head briefly, and went on.

He started forward, determined to catch her. The old excitement of the chase filled him, and his only goal now was the pursuit, after which the conquest would surely be his. He did not stop to think who she might be; he had not recognized her face. He knew only that she was beautiful, far more than ordinarily so, that there was something haunting about her eyes and her mouth, that vaguely, deep, deep in his mind, there was a familiar echo, as if somehow, in a far past time, he had known the enchantment of loving a woman like her.

She wove in and out, fleetly, light and graceful.

But try as he might, somehow he could not catch up to her. She remained always just in sight, and once or twice she paused, mockingly, as if to wait for him; but always she was gone, just as he came within easy speaking distance. He smiled, and his smile held. In one way or another, in and out of Mardi Gras, he had done this a great many times—and almost always he had emerged the victor. There was no reason why he should not add this vixen to his list of conquests.

He redoubled his efforts.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the crowd thinned and was gone. They were alone in a side street, just the two of them, with her white dress six or seven doors ahead of him, and her mocking laughter drifting back in the warm air. Night had fallen, and no lights shone, but it did not matter; like a will-o-wisp she remained always just so far ahead of him, lighter and fleeter on her feet than he, and more sure of herself in the darkness, for once or twice he stumbled and almost fell.

He had no idea where he was; he did not care. His one thought was to catch up to the woman ahead of him; to find his way back would be a matter of moments, once the conquest had been accomplished.

Quite suddenly she paused. She waited until he was almost up to her; then she turned into a dark, bush-girt lawn, running swiftly to a wide verandah, up the steps to a door, and into the house that stood there. She left the door standing ajar, which was a patent invitation.

He followed.

Inside, despite the darkness, he saw her vanishing into a dimly-lit room.

There, too, he followed.

Instantly, it seemed, the room was alight. The door was shut behind him; his quarry was over across the room. Before him and all around, even at his back, between him and the door, there were men—all in costume, the costume of pirates, clearly. But none was masked; and the domino was gone from the face of his quarry, also, as well as the smile.

For a moment the tableau held. Everyone looked at him with grim tenseness, as at an intruder whose intrusion must be punished. He felt a brief, thin pricking of fear, but, of course, it was Mardi Gras, and people would understand. Or would they? There was something ominous in the tense quiet of the room.

He looked quickly around, his eyes searching for a familiar face. He saw none.

The tableau broke.

The circle closed around him, save for one arc directly before him, in the center of which sat a roughly dandified man wearing a smart black beard and moustache. He was toying with a short-barrelled pistol of some ancient manufacture. He gazed at Verneul with a mixture of indifference and contempt, which did not conceal his grimness.

"M. Verneul," he said, rather than asked.

"I am known," said Verneul, with a faint smile.

"Speak when you are spoken to," said his host curtly.

Verneul bridled. "Look here. I admit to entering the house, at the indirect invitation of the young lady, but . . ."

"M. Verneul has entered houses after young ladies before this, I think," drawled the seated gentleman. "And forced his attentions with and without permission upon a good many of those young ladies." He nodded toward someone standing at his side.

"Will you read the charges, Mr. Ariman?"

"Whom have I the honor of addressing?" asked Verneul peremptorily.

There was a ripple of laughter. The seated gentleman rose and made a mocking bow. "Pray forgive me, sir," he said with an edge of unmistakable contempt in his voice. "I am Jean Lafitte, at your service."

His acting, thought Verneul, was startlingly real. "I am sure you will excuse me, gentlemen," he said. "But it is Mardi Gras and . . ."

"Hold your tongue," said Lafitte, and waved a hand to Ariman. "Read."

"On the sixth of February of last year, he accomplished the seduction of Claire Pechon, sixteen, against her will," read Ariman in a clear voice. "On the second of March, Mlle. Julie Argenton, with child by him, took her own life by drowning. On the eighteenth of April, he seduced Mme. Therese Munon, wife of Leon, who, discovering himself a cuckold, shot his wife and then himself. On the tenth of May, he deflowered Janise Bourgreau, seventeen."

Verneul wanted to shout his denial of the ridiculous account, but there was something puzzling, something shockingly confusing inside him. For, though he knew none of the women whose names were being read out with such solemnity, it was undeniable that as each name was read, there rose from some unknown depth of memory the picture of a woman's face, successively—of a sixteen year old girl, and one slightly older, of a married woman, of another girl—pictures which, in some remote corner of his mind, were recognizable. Words struggled to his lips, but they were not of denial.

"The prosecutor has forgotten the year of his charge," he said, as if by rote.

"Since this is 1811, the year must be 1810," said Lafitte. "You are more particular in this than ever you were about your victims, M. Verneul."

The confusion inside him increased to chaos. Were there two of him, then, that he could remember things which he knew had never taken place? And what was this of 1810 and 1811 now in this twentieth century?

"M. Verneul does not seem to understand that he is standing trial," said Lafitte.

"Trial?" echoed Verneul. "Gentlemen, I am in a fog . . ."

"Indeed, indeed," murmured Lafitte. "A good ladies' man was never a good swordsman, and quicker to know fear than most men. You shall have justice, do not be alarmed. What have you to say in your defense?"

No words came. There were words deep inside him somewhere, but they could not find an outlet.

"Come, say—is it true that you have seduced young girls?"

He could not answer.

Lafitte turned to Ariman. "Put down that the prisoner has admitted it." And to Verneul once more. "And that you have persuaded silly married women to adultery?"

No answer.

"Once more, he assents. And now, M. Verneul, is it not true also that on the seventh of this very month you attacked and ravaged Elise Gautier, my ward?" Lafitte flung his arm out to indicate the woman who, but so short a time gone by, had been his eagerly-desired quarry.

He wanted to say that he had never seen her before in his life; but he could not be sure. It seemed to him that memory of her lingered, but from what source? He could not say; he did not know. How had he come here? The woman, yes—but how had it happened? Part of him recalled the unlit streets and thought

them natural; but part thought them wrong, knew them wrong. What was happening to him? What fantastic conspiracy was this?

Lafitte had stood up. "M. Paul Verneul, will you hear your sentence?"

He wanted to say, "My name is Alan, Alan Paul," but nothing came from his lips; and indeed, at the moment he could not be sure that anything at all came from any tongue or throat; for he had cast down his eyes, and seen not floor, but long grass, and an edge of stone, as of a stone box of some kind.

". . . To be shot," Lafitte was saying. "Now."

Instantly half a dozen of the old-fashioned pistols were leveled at him, cocked and ready.

"Aim," said Lafitte to the widening circle.

Verneul stood as if paralyzed. If only he could know! Which was the dream—this or that other? Which was the reality—that distant world in which he was a counselor, or this world of the dandy of New Orleans in 1811? Which, indeed!

"Fire!" said Lafitte.

There was a round of blasts. Briefly, the world of Alan Verneul was a turbulence of strange, smoky blue.

They found him in a long-abandoned cemetery in the outlying country south of New Orleans, though still within the city limits. Dead. By what means, none could say. There were some half a dozen bluish marks on his flesh, as if bullets had gone into him; but no skin was broken. In the course of the inquiry, it was discovered that Verneul had been seen rushing madly through the Mardi Gras crowds in pursuit of someone no one had been able to see; that he had been observed by a passer-by in the cemetery, standing quite alone, talking and gesticulating so that his observer thought him drunk and went on; that the cemetery stood on the site of an old house once the property of Désiré Gautier;

that the house, according to legend, was the scene of the fatal shooting of an ancestor of Verneul's more than a century ago.

When he was found, Verneul still wore the blue spectacles.

Since Alain Verneil was curator of the city museum, he saw and recognized their value. And in good time, he got around to adding them to his collection, thus accomplishing Jesse Brennan's original intention.

Alannah

I was never one to be hasty in my judgment of others, but I *do* think that Mrs. Stewart might have paid a little more attention to Maurice, she might have given him the kind of affection he needed. Now that everything is over, there can be no harm in setting down what I know about what happened at that house. Mr. Stewart could not have done any more than he did; he had his work, and sometimes he came out from the city pretty tired. Mrs. Stewart was the one. She was that kind of woman—lived for herself too much, and not enough for others. I don't say that a person shouldn't live for himself—but not alone that. My grandmother used to say that it is much better and richer to love than to be loved. I thought of that often about Mrs. Stewart; I always felt that she never knew what it was to love. Yet I wouldn't want to say that she didn't love her son; nobody knows what love is, and love is a great many things to different people. Sometimes love is the most enriching thing in the world, and sometimes it is not; sometimes it is good and wholesome, and sometimes it is possessive and destructive and evil. Sometimes it is strong enough to live after death, and if love lives after it, then surely hunger and terror and all the emotions of man, made strong enough and great enough, live afterward, too.

The Stewarts had taken the house in the Vermont hills when I joined them. That is, they had moved in for that summer, and

they had been there for almost a month when I answered their advertisement for a governess. A great many women simply did not want to take positions so far from the city, which meant, really, that they wanted to be in the city, because the Stewart house was only about twelve miles from the nearest city, where Mr. Stewart had his law office, and from which he came home almost every night to work over his briefs. Mrs. Stewart was not the type of woman I would have thought satisfied with such a place; she was one of those women who, because they think always of themselves, are apt to get very lonely if there is not someone before whom they can perform all their little vanities.

I know it sounds as if I were prejudiced against Mrs. Stewart, but I do not think I was. It's only that if she had been a different kind of person, I don't think anything would have happened—at least, things would not have happened as they did there. I ought to say that the very first time I saw the house, I had the feeling that there was something *wrong* about it. I know people will say, "Isn't that just like a woman!" but it is true, just the same. After I got to know Mrs. Stewart I just naturally thought that she was what was wrong about the house. That was a mistake, I know now. Sometimes I wonder if the house was not responsible for some of the things Mrs. Stewart did—or rather, didn't do. I really don't have any prejudice against her, poor woman; she is what she is, just as I am what I am, and Mr. Stewart is what he is, and Maurice . . .

The house was really a beautiful house. It was old, a low two-storey stone house, with a charming roof on which the moss grew green. The stone was yellow, but *wet*—actually wet outside; that I thought was due to the brook that flowed past outside, for there was a brook, a real Vermont brook, and if you've ever seen those crystal streams, with their green-blue water, you will know what I mean. The brook came flowing down from the hills, and right

in the center of the grounds around the house, though a little off side, beyond the north end and so behind the house, its former owner had built a deep pool, with a fine brick and stone rim curving in an arc toward the brook from both banks; the brook flowed in at one end and out the other. And there were trees all along the brook, so that the pool was always shadowed and dark, and one would have thought that there would be fish in plenty there, but, strangely enough, there were fish above the pool in the brook, lying under the grassy banks, and there were fish below, but there was not a fish or a frog or even a water spider in the pool, though lilies grew there, and their green leaves and yellow flowers made the water seem all the blacker, and there was a curious illusion of bottomlessness about it when you looked into the water.

They told me—that is, Mr. Stewart, who interviewed me—that Maurice was a “problem” child, and I came prepared to deal with something like a thoroughly spoiled youngster. Maurice was then five, or a little older, and he was a singularly beautiful child, with his grave blue eyes, which could sometimes be as merry as the blue water of the brook racing over the sunlit sand and the rocks in its course, and curly blond hair, and a sensitive, full-lipped mouth; his skin was fair, with a good color, and he had an innate understanding of neatness. All that first day I kept waiting for him to explode into mischief, but he did nothing of the sort; he was quiet, a little shy, he looked into books—he was precocious for his age, they told me—, and he behaved very well. I thought it would come the next day, but it did not, and finally, somewhat mystified, I went to Mrs. Stewart and asked her bluntly in what way Maurice was a “problem” child.

Mrs. Stewart was a dark-eyed, thin-faced woman. She seemed to be always a little remote from the present, but she was very

clearly a most passionate type of woman, for she held her husband absolutely, and many times he deferred his better judgment to hers, though he never condoned error. She carried on a great deal of correspondence, and telephoned friends in the city all day long, and what I held and still hold against her was that she never seemed to find much time for Maurice, even if he was her son. When I asked her, she seemed to be annoyed at once, just as if she should not have had the duty of telling me.

"Oh, didn't Wayne tell you?"

"No, Madam, he did not. I expected a lively, mischievous lad, but I have not found Maurice at all mischievous."

"No, if it were only mischief!" she sighed. "But it's something much worse—I suppose the best way to say it is to tell you that he is endowed with an overabundance of imagination."

I said nothing.

"It is quite distressing for us, but he has fallen into the habit of telling the most bare-faced lies, and Mr. Stewart and I feel that he must be broken of it. It is embarrassing for us all to hear him speak before those of our friends who week-end with us, and the worst of it all is that there is no explanation for it."

"What kind of lies, if I may ask?"

She waved one hand about half vaguely, half in a gesture of dismissal. "Oh, all kinds of lies, Miss Kerlsen."

I must admit that I have never liked people who tell lies, though one expects a certain amount of it in children. It was a shock to me to hear that Maurice was addicted to lying; somehow we are always prone to associate goodness and all the virtues with beauty, especially in children; and I resolved that I would do all in my power to break Maurice of prevaricating. The next day I even went so far as to test him. I saw him break a little dish in the kitchen, and carefully pick up the pieces to discard them

in the ash-can; so I asked him quite casually about an hour later what had become of the little dish, as if I wanted to use it for something.

"I broke it, Miss Kerlsen," he said candidly.

That puzzled me. I reasoned that if he were the bare-faced liar his mother said he was, he would certainly have lied about the dish; he did not know I had seen him. It was very mystifying, and it grew more so as the days slipped by. Until the sixth day—that was Saturday, for I came on the Monday of that week. That day Maurice came over to where I was resting on the low verandah on the south side of the house and said that Alannah wanted to see me. Though I had never seen Maurice with a playmate, I assumed that Alannah was someone from one of the farms nearby.

"Bring her here," I said.

"Oh, no. You've got to go to her," answered Maurice, and held out his hand confidently.

"Very well," I said, laughing, and took his hand.

He led me around the house quite proudly. I thought his playmate would be out in back, that is, on the up-slope of the hill, but there was no one there. Nevertheless, Maurice led the way straight across the yard; I looked all around quickly, but I could see no one. Then we came to the pool, where Maurice was accustomed to spend long hours dreaming, and Maurice pulled at my hand, and sat down, indicating that I was to sit down, too.

"But where is she?" I asked.

"Do not say anything, please, Miss Kerlsen."

His fair face was flushed with excitement, and I thought his pulse had quickened a little. I put up my hand to touch his forehead, to discover whether he had a fever, but I had barely touched his skin before the most extraordinary thing happened. I felt as if my hand had been brushed aside. The impression was only

momentary, it is true, and at the same time Maurice leaned away a little to look into the water; so that in a few seconds I decided that the illusion had been caused by the boy's movement. I looked around to where the woods came down at the far end of the lawn, half expecting to see a little girl come running out; but there was no sign of anyone. Maurice continued to gaze into the pool, with a little smile on his lips. His eyes, though, were somewhat anxious.

Suddenly, without a word, he stood up, offered me his hand, and hurried me back to the verandah. He smiled quickly at me, and then hastened back around the house. I was astonished by his action, and took the trouble to walk out from the verandah until I could look back into the lawn there to see where he had gone. Just as I suspected, he was sitting on the rim of the pool once more, looking into that dark water, reaching down with one hand.

That evening, as I stood beside his bed, I asked him, "And where was your Alannah this afternoon, Maurice?"

"You didn't see her," he answered in a curiously flat tone of voice, as if he were disappointed.

"No, I didn't," I answered. "How does she look?"

"Oh, she's pretty."

"Is she as pretty as Mother?"

"Yes."

"Where does she live?"

"In the pool."

So at last I understood what the Stewarts meant by saying that Maurice was a "problem" child, that he told bare-faced lies. It was not true that he told lies of all kinds; of that I was certain. He had probably told his parents about Alannah, and they had not understood that a sensitive, imaginative child lives in a world of make-believe, and, lacking companions in the flesh, is very apt

to conjure up imaginary companions. At the moment I did not say anything; I only smiled at Maurice, but I was instantly resentful that his parents should not have taken a little more trouble to find out that what Maurice needed more than anything else was companionship. There was no one—only his mother, the cook, an old gardener who came over from a nearby farm, and myself, with his father in the evenings, all far older than the boy—no one his own age. And since there was no likelihood of there being anyone his own age here for the summer, I knew that I would have to enter into his play-world with him as much as possible.

I went right down to where Mr. and Mrs. Stewart sat, in a screened-off porch on the west side of the living-room, and asked them whether the boy's imagination was the thing that had caused them to think of him as a problem child.

"It is lies," said Mrs. Stewart stubbornly.

"I would not call them lies," I answered, just as stubbornly. "The boy is just lonely, and he makes up these things."

Mr. Stewart looked up from his papers and observed that it was surely not a healthy sign. He seemed genuinely concerned.

"I don't know what you mean by healthy, but it's certainly normal enough."

"No, no it is not," said Mrs. Stewart.

"That is just not my opinion alone, Mrs. Stewart," I replied.

"I don't care whose opinion it is. Maurice has got to be stopped from telling those—those tall tales or whatever you want to call them." Her eyes flashed at me. "We're depending on you to do what you can."

"I shall do what I can, but I think it is the worst thing in the world to treat the boy as if he were a liar. I will not do that."

"We expect you to do things in your way, Miss Kerlsen," said Mr. Stewart.

The issue, you see, was not cleanly forced. It never was; Mrs. Stewart remained emotional about it, and annoyed; Mr. Stewart was too far from its daily manifestations, obviously. And I - well; I suppose you might say that if I had a more common-sense attitude, I lacked imagination in almost the same proportion as Maurice had an overabundance of it. I suppose if I had had a little more of it, what happened would not have had to happen.

As I was coming up the stairs considerably later that night, I saw Maurice coming down the hall. The hour was almost midnight, though it was a clear night, with a moon shining, and I wondered what he was doing up at that hour. He could have got himself a drink in the bathroom next to his room; so it was not that. I concealed myself and watched him go by. He went down and out of the house, and I went after him, not making a sound.

He went right over to the pool and crouched down on the rim in his white nightgown, and I heard his whispered voice calling, "Alannah! Alannah!" in hushed tones. And then suddenly a little rippling came on the water, a vapor that was not there before. How it startled me! I felt chilled at the sight of it, but it was gone again just as quickly as it had come; there was nothing there, and I began to think my eyes had played a trick on me when Maurice came along with his hand held out and up, just as if he were holding someone's hand, the hand of an older person, and he kept looking up from time to time, as if he were listening to someone walking at his side.

I cannot describe my feelings as I saw that. It was uncanny. I saw him quite clearly in the moonlight, but there was absolutely nothing else moving across the lawn—only that curly-headed lad in his white nightgown. But when he went past me, where I stood in the shadow of an old tree near the house, I felt his passage as if a cold wind had brushed me, and once again that feeling of unutterable chill, and something of terrible emotional intensity rose

up and seemed to cling to me, like something alive; so that I was frightened, almost terrified, by something I could not see or hear, something less tangible than the wind. That feeling lingered until after Maurice had gone into the house, and it was some moments before I could bring myself to follow him.

I went straight to the stairs—he had to go upstairs to his bed—and the moment I put my hand on the stair-rail, I withdrew it as if I had touched ice. I might as well have done so, for the rail was *wet*, wet and *cold*, oh, how cold! And the moment I touched it, I felt the most awful loneliness I ever knew, I felt the most dreadful solitude, as if I were isolated in a place far, far from any human touch or voice, and I felt invaded by the most tearing longing, the most moving desire for someone to hold close to me, *someone to possess, to love!*

It was awful!

I wrenched my hand away and fell back against the wall, shaking and trembling. I put on the light, and, though I would not touch the stair-rail again, I saw the wet gleaming on it all the way up, and I followed it; I saw the wet along the hall and the wall and I saw it on the knob of the door to Maurice's room. I did not want to touch it again, but I had to know that he was all right. So I leaned forward, bracing myself, and quickly opened the door.

The instant I touched the wetness, I felt it again—oh, the most heart-rending despair, the most pitiful agony, the most utter desolation! Oh, the terrible wanting for someone, someone near, someone to love and adore, someone to belong to and to belong to me! I clung to the door and looked in; but he was there, safe in his bed; and I pulled the door shut and drew away from it, shuddering and gasping, for such a tearing emotion I had never known, such a cold isolation of the spirit, such a dread and terror and *emptiness*. It was just as if all the sorrows and griefs of a

lifetime had come to life anew and taken away all the memories of compensating pleasures, as if someone were forever doomed to live out his years far from his kind—oh, it is impossible to describe it, **it was terrible!**

Whatever they may say of me, I am not a coward. I knew then that there was something horribly wrong about the house. Despite the crying out of every instinct against it, I forced myself to go back down stairs, back out across the lawn to the pool. I sat down on the rim, and looked into that black water, where now the moonlight lay like silver, and I could see my face there looking up at me out of that dark, moonlit water, spectrally. It was beautiful there, with the moonlight all around, and the brook talking above and below the pool, and occasionally the sound of a fish splashing. I sat there looking into the pool for five minutes, ten minutes—I do not know what I expected to see there. Certainly it was not what I saw just as I got up to go—that other thin face, a woman's face, with dark where her eyes should have been, and light hair flowing wetly down beside her head, so sharp and strong that I thought it was someone looking over my shoulder into the water, and turned, but there was no one there, no one at all. And then there was nothing in the water either, nothing but my own face looking down. But there was something inside me again—once more that terrible loneliness, that poignant longing, that incredible, hurtful wanting, that agonized desolation which shook me and tore me and sent me staggering away from that pool and brought me to my knees in tears, that strong it was, that terrible and moving.

I fled to the house and was glad to be in my room, myself once more, save for the trembling and the pity I felt for whatever it was in such desperation out there.

I think it was two days later that I found the letter. It was stuck in an old album, put into where a photograph should have been, and left in a closet off my room. It was ten years old, in a man's handwriting, and it was addressed to Mrs. Luella Withers. It was not a nice letter.

"Lu Alannah,

"I have tried all week to talk myself into coming back and starting over, but it's no use. I'm too weak to do it, I never was much on the noble side of things anyway. So I've taken passage on a tramp steamer for Singapore and the Malay States, which makes it easy for you to get a divorce on grounds of desertion. I want you to have the house; it is really yours, you planned it and all. I am sorry there never was a youngster to share it with us for the little while we were there together. It was rotten luck, but it was our luck.

Jack."

I put it back where I found it and went down to talk to Mrs. Stewart. I asked her who had lived in this house before.

"A Mrs. Luella Withers, Miss Kerlsen."

"What kind of woman was she?"

She shrugged. "I have no idea. She's dead, of course. The house belongs to some relative and we leased it through an agent."

She knew nothing at all about Mrs. Withers. I was half of a mind to point out to her that it was a curious coincidence to discover that Mr. Withers had called his wife by the same pet name that Maurice called his friend. I should not have asked Mrs. Stewart at all; she said she thought it was not "proper" to inquire into the habits and the life of the previous tenant of the house. I should have talked to someone else right away. As it was, it was

three days after that before I managed to take a few hours one afternoon while Maurice was asleep to walk down the country road and pay a visit to one of the neighbors.

Mrs. Warren was a farmer's wife, well along in years, but still a big, strong woman. She was canning strawberries that day, and I sat in the kitchen with her, after telling her who I was. Like most country people, once they have no reason to be suspicious of you, she was very friendly with an ease of manner that made it very pleasant to talk to her. She took me for just what I was, and only asked about the Stewarts in the most casual way, not prying at all, but just wanting to know something about her neighbors, so that it was easy for me, at last, to come around to the subject of Mrs. Luella Withers.

"Oh, yes, I knew her," said Mrs. Warren. "Poor, poor woman!" She shook her head, and an expression of sympathy appeared in her warm brown eyes.

"Was she unhappy here?"

"Unhappy's not in it. She was terrible lonesome. I never saw a woman—nor a man, either—that lonesome. She would set and eat her heart out. Her husband got lost on a steamer somewhere. Nobody knows what made him up and take the trip in the first place. They didn't have any children; so she was left alone. And how she wanted a child! I don't know what it was, but I think she was the one couldn't have children. Anyway, if a body took a boy or a girl up along with her visiting there, she never wanted the child to leave, she used to try to keep him there or coax him back—why, it was something awful the way she carried on! They said the lonesomeness just went to her head. It made her thin and hungry-looking, and I reckon in the end it would have killed her."

"She is dead, then?"

"Oh, yes. Couldn't stand it any more. I guess he left her the

house, but there wasn't much money; she tried to sell it, but she couldn't; and she couldn't go anywhere else—no money, you see—so one fine day she up and drowned herself."

"In the pool," I said almost involuntarily.

"Yes. They say it's deeper than a body thinks."

It gave me a queer helpless feeling to listen to Mrs. Warren tell about Mrs. Withers. "Tell me," I said at last, "did you ever hear her called *Alannah*?"

"That was *his* name for her. I reckon it's a sweetening name. It's not a name that's in the books, but he would say it the way a man would talk to his sweetheart, and she would smile and her eyes would shine—so I reckon that's what it was."

After that, I felt that the best thing for Maurice would be to get him away from there. I thought it all over that night, and the next morning, before Mr. Stewart left, I went downstairs and talked to them both at the breakfast table. Maurice was still asleep. I said that I had been thinking everything over, and I felt that Maurice was not lying at all, that his loneliness was responsible for his queer fancies. Perhaps I should have said that I was not sure they were fancies, but I knew that if I had, they would have discounted everything I recommended; so I could not; I had to hold back part of the truth. They were somewhat put out, but I convinced them.

Then I said, "If I may make a further suggestion, I would most strongly recommend that Maurice be not told of your intention to leave until it is time to go, or else he may brood about it."

"That is going too far," said Mrs. Stewart. "I will not have the boy growing up a mollicoddle. He will have to learn now that life never gives anybody his way all the time."

I said that the principle was a sound one, but in this case, I felt its application would work adversely, and I begged them to reconsider, with such earnestness that Mr. Stewart said finally

they would think it over, and there the matter rested—until the day before they left.

Mrs. Stewart had her way after all. True, they compromised. Mr. Stewart thought I was right, but Mrs. Stewart thought she was right; so they compromised by not telling Maurice until the morning of the day before they planned to return to town, and then they told him.

We were all sitting at the table that morning, and when they told him, I saw his face; he went all white, and one hand clenched tightly around his fork.

"I'm not going," he said in a low voice.

"What was that?" asked Mrs. Stewart.

"I'm not going," he said again.

"I don't think you need more than a day to say goodbye to your *friend*," said Mrs. Stewart coldly.

Mr. Stewart coughed.

Maurice put down his fork precisely and sat back.

"Eat your breakfast, Maurice," said Mrs. Stewart warningly.

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat."

"I won't."

Mrs. Stewart looked up with flashing eyes. "You see, first it is lies and then it is disobedience," she said to no one in particular. "It goes from bad to worse, and if he is this way now, what will he be a few years from now?"

Maurice got up and went away from the table.

"Come back here!" cried Mrs. Stewart in a voice that was shrill with anger. Maurice never said a word but simply walked out of the room.

Mrs. Stewart would have got up and gone after him, but he held her back. He said brusquely that telling Maurice had been a shock, and it was better to let it work itself out of him without

any unnecessary pressure. I was grateful for that, and Mrs. Stewart, after brooding about Maurice's behavior for a few minutes, resumed her breakfast and grew quite cheerful again, as if she had forgotten the entire incident.

But I did not forget it. I watched Maurice carefully all that day, and I watched him especially at the pool. I was short with his lessons that day because I knew he would want to go around and bid his favorite haunts good-bye. He did not say very much, but I could see that he had something on his mind. People often think, particularly adults who have grown far away from their own childhood, that a child's world is dependent upon the world of the adults; but this was never so and will never be true, for a child always lives in his own world, no matter what his circumstances, and a sensitive child never completely forgets that world in his adulthood.

I was glad when Maurice fell asleep that night. He had spent a long time at the pool during the late afternoon, and I felt sure that he had been bidding Alannah good-bye; so I asked him gently that evening whether he had.

"Yes. She doesn't want me to go, and I don't want to go. Miss Kerlsen, I like her better than Mum. Is that wrong?"

"I don't think so if you keep it your secret." It was a difficult question to answer.

"Alannah loves me."

"Yes," I said, with a catch in my throat. "Yes, I'm sure she does. But you can come back some time and see her again."

He looked at me gravely and smiled. "They always tell me I'm lying when I talk about Alannah, but you don't, Miss Kerlsen."

"I believe you, Maurice," I said.

"Thank you," he answered.

I did not leave him until he had fallen asleep. And then I sat up until one o'clock in the morning.

As it turned out, I did not sit up long enough. I was very tired, for I had helped with the packing, and I fell asleep. It was about two o'clock when I awoke, and the waning moon had just reached about tree-height in the sky. I do not know what woke me, unless it was the movement of something before my eyes, closed as they were; that is an experience far more usual than is commonly supposed. I had fallen asleep before the window that looked down to the lawn and the brook; the pool lay within easy sight, and the object which had crossed before my eyes was Maurice in his nightgown on his way to the pool.

I was fully awake right away. I came out of my chair to my knees at the window and called to him.

"Maurice! Maurice! Come back!"

But he did not turn. He went straight over to the pool and he sat down on the rim of it, and I heard his voice, low and soothing, as if he were comforting someone, and then I saw that vapor again, like a long, white woman's arm come up out of the water and take his hand and pull him into the pool.

I screamed, stumbled to my feet, and ran out of the room as fast as I could —down the stairs and across the lawn.

But I was too late. Maurice had gone under and he did not come up again until he had drowned.

Even while the others came running from the house, there was something else. While I knelt there at that dark pool I felt something come out of it and go past me toward the stone house behind, and I saw the grass move in the moonlight as if two people walked there. And what I felt was not cold, it was not any more that terrible, despairing loneliness—no, it was warm and fulfilling, ineffably beautiful, as if the heart and soul of love itself had become briefly, briefly tangible there and touched me in passing by.

Dead Man's Shoes

When he came to the top of the hill he paused to rest. He put down the basket of morels, shaking them a little so that spores of the mushrooms might fall out and perchance take hold and grow next spring. He stretched. It was a beautiful afternoon in May, and the mid-western countryside rolled away in low hills, with woods and fields, a green that was neither lush nor yet pale with early growing, but in that middle stage, with blossoms here and there, and the not-long-turned fields black or brown, as the nature of the soil determined it. From all around him rose the pungent perfume of bergamotte crushed underfoot where he walked. A pewee sang dulcetly from the deep woods down the farther slope. Far off toward the northern horizon he could just see the river, and a little to the east, a pair of lakes, cobalt under the cloudless sky.

It was such a scene and such a day as Douglas Lynn had often known. Not that it was prosaic; the natural beauty of a May afternoon could never become that. He sat down on a stump and relaxed, and with his act of relaxation something happened to him. It was important to recall to himself later that his thoughts had been only of mushrooms, of the beauty of the earth spread out before his eyes from this hilltop vantage point, of the perfumes of flowers on the wind, and that the sun was warm, and the day warm, with a mild wind blowing out of the west. What happened

was in direct contrast, for suddenly, without warning, the scene before his eyes vanished, and he found himself in the midst of a blinding snowstorm; he was conscious of intense cold, and he had the sensation of falling through space. Snow, icy snow, struck into his face, blinding him. For a few moments he seemed to see tall pine trees rising darkly up toward him through the snow, and great drifts of snow below, with dark water flowing out from under ice.

Then it was over, and all was as before—the sensation of cold, the sight of snow, the pine trees and the flowing water—all were gone; and before his eyes rolled once more the familiar countryside, serene, unchanged, precisely as it was five minutes before, save that a pair of horses drawing a plow across a slope some distance away had advanced half way through the field. The sensation of snow and cold had been so strong that Lynn unconsciously touched his face to see if it were wet and cold; it was not. He thought that perhaps he had been the victim of a curious kind of functional suspension—perhaps of heart or digestive tract or nerves, and yet he had never felt better, only a little tired, and his pulse was normal.

That was how it began.

It happened twice more during that afternoon, and each time Lynn was keenly aware of a violence of conflict, as between two worlds; each time he felt a bitter cold, with snow driving into his face, he experienced a wonder of falling, a terror of space, the consciousness of something—yes, something malignant toward which he was falling unchecked. After the third time, he retraced his steps rather more hurriedly than he had come, and something had gone out of the afternoon. He was conscious of a curious tension.

"I really felt that cold and snow," he said later, explaining to his wife. "I was falling—just as plainly as I'm sitting now."

Mrs. Lynn spoke somewhat glibly in terms of psychiatry. "That sort of hallucination is rather rare, but not at all out of bounds."

"But the reason, Milly!"

"Oh, who knows? Those things don't need a reason, Doug. They just happen."

"That's a dreadful thought—that things like that can hit a man without warning any day, any time."

"You were relaxed at the time—your mind was open to impressions from outside."

"Ha!" he interrupted her. "And where in the devil would I get an impression like that when the only thing I had in mind was mushrooms?"

"Anyway, you're attaching importance to it—and that's not advisable. Forget about it. It's just something that you imagined or, if you like, something that happened."

Lynn did not forget it, but in a few days' time, he remembered it only as a curious and inexplicable incident. He had cause to think about it even more when he mentioned it casually to Howard Sherman. Sherman had grown unaccountably agitated; he had paled a little, asked one or two sharp questions, and then abruptly changed the subject. In itself, from the usually jolly Sherman, this was fully as curious as the thing that had happened to Lynn on the hill. He said nothing about it to his wife, lest she conclude that what had happened was still preying on his mind.

A week later, following an all night's rain, which was certain to stimulate mushroom growth, Lynn went out again. He took a different route this time, going to examine some old orchards he knew. Orchards produced as many morels as oak groves and shady pastures and burnt-over areas.

It was again a fine day, and the orchards did not disappoint him. Mushrooms grew profusely, and he picked steadily during

the two hours that remained of the morning. He had had the foresight to bring lunch with him, since he intended to stay out well into the afternoon, and, having completed his search in his second abandoned orchard, he sat down on a fallen tree and began to open his lunch.

In the midst of this mundane occupation, he was once again stricken with that curious and terrible hallucination—the landscape blotted away, the quiet of the noon hour gave way to a tearing, whistling wind, to the rattle and whine of bullets, to sharp cracking, as of shots, to shouting and terror and horror; he was falling again, falling through snow and sleet and icy winds, falling out of dark heaven to the ghostly white earth beneath, among trees brushing at him and the frozen fingers of fear and death reaching up towards him. And hatred, and malignant, violent, frustrated anger! Then, as suddenly as it had come upon him, it was gone—and with it went his appetite for food, and for more of that zestful hunting after mushrooms. He felt suddenly an overwhelming desire to escape the uncertainty of what had happened and take flight into the familiar once more.

The boots he wore seemed tight; his hands tingled. His sandwich lay before him, just as he had unwrapped it. He wrapped it again, resolutely, and stood up. His boots seemed to clasp to his feet and legs, heavy, insistent. What a curious feeling! he thought. Perhaps he had been right after all, when he had hesitated to buy them from Howard Sherman, thinking them a little small. Only the fact that they had been Jack's had decided him. He moved his feet inside the boots, as if to restore circulation, and in a little while the cramped feeling passed.

He went home.

This time he did not tell his wife. After all, he had enough mushrooms to account for his being home earlier than he had expected to be. He took a cup of coffee and said he was going up-

stairs to lie down briefly before getting at the lawn which he had promised to mow later that day.

He lay for some time thinking. He was not satisfied with Milly's "hallucination" explanation. Assuming it was not an hallucination, what did he have? He had something completely, utterly alien. But even something alien, he reflected, must have reason, meaning, a source. He thought about it—the snow, the cold, the sensation of falling, and as he thought, it was borne in upon him that Jack Sherman had been a paratrooper, and the boots he had bought were Jack's, salvaged after Jack's death in action in the Aleutians, and the thing that had happened to him had taken place only when he wore the boots on his expeditions after mushrooms! What an extraordinary chain of thought!

He got up immediately and went downstairs.

"I thought you were resting," said his wife, looking at him over her knitting.

"I was. I was lying there thinking about Jack."

"Jack Sherman?"

"Yes."

"That's funny. So was I."

"Really? What about?"

"I was just wondering how it was going to turn out over there." She bent her head toward the Sherman house.

"You mean—Howard?"

"Oh, yes. A woman would see that he was keen on Helen, you know. Even before they went into service and Howard came back on a medical and Jack didn't come back at all."

"Will she have him, do you think?"

"Why not?"

"I wondered."

"Helen is practical, I should think. Widows in this war are less likely to find second husbands than at any other similar time."

"I was thinking about his boots," he said.

"Oh, yes. I think that was a good buy. I wonder that Howard sold them—or that Helen let him."

"Howard has a pair of his own, you know."

"That's so."

"About the boots—you see, I was wearing them when that happened to me last week—"

"Oh, that!"

"And again today."

She flashed him a quick, alarmed glance. "Doug, again?"

He nodded mutely.

"Oh, that's bad. Recurrent hallucination. Why don't you stop in and see Dr. Briggs? He's good for that sort of thing."

"Do you think it would help?"

"I most certainly do."

Perhaps, after all, he had been somewhat hasty in groping for an answer. He stopped in to see the psychiatrist and told him everything that had taken place. Dr. Briggs said that he was "frustrated", and very likely did not give his impulses free enough rein. He yearned for "freedom" from the prosaic, and the thing that had happened to him had its roots in a natural rebellion against a job, his marriage—in short, everything that increased his responsibilities in a social rather than a personal sense. "Yield to your impulses a little more often, Mr. Lynn," he advised sagely. He had a hearty laugh about the boots, when Lynn told him. Lynn laughed, too, thinking about it in the white-walled office.

It took a great deal of inner courage for him to go out after mushrooms again next day. He lost no time; as soon as he came in from the office, he went out into the woods, wearing Jack's boots and his usual outdoors garb. This time he consciously waited for it to happen; he reasoned that if this thing were going

to happen to him, it need not be when he was unaware. He relaxed and invited it, as it were.

And it came—everything again—the cold, the snow, the terror; all the horror and rage and the frustrated violence. And something more—a fierce, tearing impulse toward vengeance and death, a terrible compulsion toward retribution! He came out of it cold and clammy with perspiration and staggering. Afterwards, after he had recovered his equilibrium a little, he gathered a few morels and hurried home, lest he be taken unawares—and now he had no wish to be, for he was conscious of a cumulative force in what was happening to him, in this conflict with another, alien world.

He said nothing at all to Milly.

Just the same, next morning Milly said something to him.

"You're thinking about Jack and his boots too much, I'm afraid," she said. "Or something's preying on your mind. You must have had a frightful dream last night."

"No!"

"You talked. I thought you were awake. It was not pleasant."

"Really?"

"Doug—don't you really remember?"

"Not a thing. Tell me."

"It was about Jack." She was dubious. "I don't know whether I ought to tell you. I don't know where you ever got such an idea into your head."

"I'm sure I can bear up under it."

"You talked to me—as if you were Jack yourself. It gave me duck bumps, Doug—it sounded so—so real! Even though what you said . . . I can't repeat it word for word, but it was as if Jack were trying to tell me he was not shot by that Jap at all, but by someone else."

"That's ridiculous, of course. Howard was there. Howard had

gone down from the plane ahead of Jack, you know, and he himself shot the Jap who got Jack."

"I know."

But at the office this brief conversation came back to him. He repeated in his thoughts what he had said. "He himself shot the Jap who got Jack." He took that apart and mulled it over. If Howard had come down first and got set, rid of the parachute and everything, what was the Jap doing waiting for Jack? He had not thought of that before. Why had not the Jap shot Howard, and then picked Jack off? It did not seem logical at all that the Jap should stand his ground, wait to shoot Jack, and then be shot in turn by Howard, who had previously landed. If Jack had got down first and Howard afterward . . . !

Once having formulated the picture, he could not get rid of it. He thought about it all day, maddeningly. Howard had wanted Helen and Jack had got Helen and now Jack was dead and Howard was planning to take his place and—God, what a hellish circle! What a devil of a maze for a man to get into! What a complex of pulp reading and Class C movies and soap operas!

He decided, irrationally, that it was the boots which were responsible for everything. Perhaps the psychiatrist had been right in one sense—the boots had impressed him unfavorably, probably because they had been taken from a dead man, and this impression, suppressed, had motivated everything which had taken place since. That was not only a distinct possibility, but a sound probability.

Having come to this conclusion, there was only one thing left for Lynn to do. He would return the boots to Howard and ask for his money back.

In the afternoon he went over to Sherman's, carrying the boots in a cardboard box, rehearsing a speech to make to Howard. Helen let him in; she did not know whether Howard was at home, but if Lynn would go into Howard's den, she would look

around the house. Lynn followed her docilely, thanked her, and flung himself down on a lounge.

Almost at once he saw Howard's boots just inside the closet door,—just like his own—and the sight of them made it possible for him to see himself objectively, as Howard might see him once he began to explain his errand. And then, instantly, an impulsive way out presented itself. Why not simply exchange the boots? Having thought it, the thought became imperative. He acted. In a trice the boots were out of the box and replacing Howard's; and Howard's were in the box. When Howard came, he would say nothing about the boots at all—they were the same size, they had the same appearance, Howard would never notice that an exchange had been made. He would simply pretend he had come over to ask him to take a hike into the woods.

But Howard was not, after all, at home, as Helen came back to tell him; so he was spared even this.

And when, next day, he went out after morels, wearing Howard's boots, he had a wonderful jaunt in the hills, he collected a heaping basket of mushrooms, and nothing whatsoever untoward happened to him.

"It was all right today," he said to his wife on his return.

"You needed only a little common sense and self-confidence, Doug," she said complacently. "I was just a little worried when you began to talk about Jack's boots as if—well, as if they were haunted or something!"

He was embarrassed briefly because his laughter had such a grotesquely hollow sound.

May flowered into summer, and summer into autumn, and presently snow fell, and nothing at all strange or mysterious happened to Douglas Lynn any more.

The snow reminded Lynn fleetingly of his curious experience

of that preceding May—something he could look back upon as utterly strange, a little mystic now, as if it had not really happened, after all, but had actually been only a figment of his imagination, as Milly and Dr. Briggs had suggested. The neighborhood began to go out on skiing parties and sleighing jaunts into the hills.

Four days after New Year's, the neighborhood was torn by tragedy. Howard Sherman fell off a cliff and was killed—just a day before his brother's widow planned to announce her engagement to him.

Lynn could not get the thought of Howard's untimely end out of his mind, and when the District Attorney stopped by one day on a social visit and began to talk about Howard, Lynn listened eagerly.

"It was lucky we didn't have to bother Howard. You know, we had a crackpot letter—not anonymous, though; I'll give him that—from some fellow in Seattle, home on furlough, who wrote to tell us there was something strange about Jack Sherman's death, and if Howard was here, to ask him about it. Hell, the plain fact was—he was hinting that Howard had shot his own brother!"

"Oh," said Lynn faintly.

His wife looked over in sudden, anxious curiosity.

"But Jack's death couldn't have been any stranger than Howard's," the District Attorney went on.

"Why?" Lynn asked bluntly.

"Well, I looked over his tracks in the snow. I looked over everything very carefully. I've never seen anything like it. It was an accident, of course—it couldn't have been anything else; there wasn't another footprint around anywhere, and clear, unbroken snow. But you know, the tracks and the marks on the trees and the indications in the snow toward the edge of the cliff pointed

toward something just as clearly as if it had been written there—as if something had pulled him over that cliff, something he couldn't control or fight, because the marks were there of where he tried to hang onto saplings and tree-trunks, and finally where he apparently threw himself flat into the snow—as if to keep himself from being dragged or forced off that cliff. An extraordinary thing! We had to put it down as an accident, of course—not another track, not a sign of another human being for rods and rods around. And yet, for almost the whole distance from the grove at the crest to the cliff's edge, it was just as if he were fighting something he couldn't reach, and trying like a poor damned soul to keep from going over that cliff!"

Lynn swallowed and licked his dry lips. "I know," he said in a husky whisper. "I know just how he felt—with the snow and the cold and the falling. He was wearing the boots—*his boots!*"

"Of course—with the snow and the weather. Just the thing—those paratrooper boots! But what got into Howard no one will ever know, I'm afraid. There was everything to show—broken fingernails, even torn flesh at the fingertips—*that he was trying frantically to get those boots off before he reached the edge of the cliff!*"

"It could have been suicide while of unsound mind," said Milly clearly.

"The boots!" said Lynn in a choked voice.

"Yes, the best," said the District Attorney heartily, putting on his hat. "First chance I get, I'm going to buy a pair like that myself. Second hand or not—I'm not superstitious about dead men's shoes!"

The Tsantsa in the Parlor

After seven years of profound silence—surely a length of time sufficiently long to have encouraged hope for the worst—Ernest Ambler made it plain to his uncle Theophilus that he was not, after all, dead—“lost in the wilds of South America,” as he put it, but not permanently. His letter was followed by his peace-offering, and no doubt, the old man reflected pessimistically, his peace-offering would in all probability shortly be followed by Ernest himself, and there would then begin once more the problem of waiting upon Ernest’s better nature just long enough to allow his real self to assert control, after which Ernest would need to be packed off to some remote place all over again.

Full circle. Circles, rather.

“I may very well be a crusty old curmudgeon,” said Theophilus to the single servant who waited upon him in his gloomy old house on Main Street in the Southern town of Euphoria, “but naturally, *I* couldn’t believe it, could I? No, of course not,” he went on, replying to his question precisely as he had replied to his own questions for half a century gone by, “nor do I need Ernest to remind me. What a curse on my old bones! To have to deal with Ernest once, twice, thrice—and God knows how many times! Get his room ready, Fulton. And what was in that box? I noticed you took the stamps off for your cousin’s girl—I hope her collection is growing.”

“It is, Mr. Ambler. Very much. Thanks to you partly.”

"The box, Fulton."

"Yes, sir. A small object."

"Yes, it was, wasn't it! Oh, forgive me—you meant its contents. I referred to the box. My error. A small object, eh? What kind of object?"

"It was a shriveled something. Rubbery."

"Where is it?"

"Over on the mantel. I thought perhaps it was meant to belong with your collection of ivory and ebony pieces."

Theophilus Ambler meandered over to look at his nephew's peace-offering. He was a tall thin man, but not cadaverous so much as anemic-looking, still able despite his seventy-odd years, and only a little absent-minded. He put on his pince-nez and peered.

The peace-offering stood between an ivory elephant and an ebony rock, looming larger than either. Brown, shriveled, rubbery indeed, with a resemblance to a monkey's head; it was not nice to touch. He swept it off the mantel in the palm of his hand and held it forth into the sunlight streaming through the French windows.

"Ernest will never change," he said. "I suppose he would call it a sense of humor."

"What is it, Mr. Ambler?"

"Damn it, man—you might have seen it for yourself. It's a human head, shrunken, of course. Probably Jivaro in origin. They call these things tsantsas. There are still head-hunters down there, I suspect. It doesn't seem to be Ernest's head, though. Much too dark. An Indian, probably."

"It's an odd gift, isn't it?"

"Only Ernest would think of it. And what the devil I'm to do with it, I don't know."

"No one would notice it among those pieces, sir. That's why I put it there."

Ambler smiled and replaced it. "Good enough. Now let me have his letter again."

"I think it's in the pocket of your robe, sir."

"Oh, yes. So it is." He took it out and read it slowly, aloud, while Fulton stood in almost obsequious attention. "'Dear Uncle Theophilus, Like a bad penny, I am turning up again. It now seems quite possible that I may be in the States again within a few weeks or months—events will determine that—and I should like to see you, naturally. I hope all is forgiven. Under separate cover, I am sending you a little curio which you might like. I picked it up not long ago and thought of you immediately. My best wishes.' Humph! Best wishes, indeed. That is an ambiguous letter, in my opinion. But, of course, Ernest never wrote anything straight-forward in his life—or spoke it, either. How long ago was it written? Three weeks. I suppose we can expect him any day."

"I'm afraid so," agreed Fulton.

Fulton drifted out of the room and Theophilus was left alone. He made a determined effort to put the unpleasant thought of his nephew from his mind, and settled down to read. But Ernest persisted, Ernest, who had never been a very pleasant child, and who had made life miserable for practically everyone, relative or friend, with whom he had been associated. And how long will it be before I have to get him out of another scrape? he wondered. He was really getting too well along in years for that sort of thing, he felt. Not really doddering yet, of course, but still—no longer young. And Ernest, who must now be well into his forties, was old enough by this time to know what responsibilities meant. But he knew in his heart that Ernest would never be old enough for that.

In the night the house creaked and groaned in the wind; rafters cracked and the bushes around the old building whispered in the hushing night air. Theophilus Ambler went to his bed not long after sundown, and Fulton went shortly thereafter. The old house was thus quickly lulled in darkness, and the sounds it made were long familiar. Mice scuttered in the attic, making their intimate small patterings; Theophilus had come to welcome them; he slept to their footsteps, and no creak or crack or groan invaded his sleep.

But this night a new sound flowed through the house.

Theophilus woke to it at last. He lay for a while listening, and decided finally that it must be Fulton talking in his sleep. Or grumbling. He sighed and waited for the sound to subside.

But it did not subside. So Theophilus dragged himself out of bed, got into his slippers and dressing-gown in the dark, puttered over to a candle, lit it, and held it before him to light his way into the hall. He went down to Fulton's room, opened the door, and looked in. Fulton's face caught the flickering candle-light.

Theophilus listened.

No sound. Nothing whatever from Fulton.

Fulton lay in peaceful sleep, as quiet as a tired child. And a child he is sometimes, reflected Theophilus wearily, withdrawing again and closing the door.

He stood there in the shadowed hall, listening.

Certainly there was a voice somewhere. Since it was not Fulton's, it must belong to someone else. A faint prickle of perturbation made itself evident. No one else should be in the house, and the sound came from inside; the wind would have whipped breath away from anyone beyond the walls.

Thoughtfully, Theophilus blew out the candle. He felt somewhat more secure in darkness without the light to offer himself

as a target for any possible invader. Ah, but who would invade the house? And for what? For there was nothing of value in any part of it. And what potential burglar would announce himself so carelessly?

The darkness enfolded him, the darkness enclosed him in an **uncertain security.**

He went noiselessly back along the hall to the head of the stairs. The sound came from below, steadily. Ah, but what was it? A muttering—or a tittering—a shrill gibberish—or an incoherent series of mouthings, scarcely human. And yet, now and then, it seemed, there were guttural words.

Ambler listened, straining himself to detach and isolate recognizable sounds.

And presently, slowly, word by word, fragments of a sentence fell into his consciousness, and he put them together painstakingly, while the darkness pressed about him with false security.

"Een . . . thees . . . house . . . ees . . . Meestaire Amblair . . ."

The darkness concealed menace, the terrible muttering from below gave birth to alarm. Ambler was not afraid, but he was not inclined to dare the unknown without weapons and without some knowledge of what he might face. He felt instinctively that something dreadful lurked in the darkness below.

"Bite," said the gibbering voice. "Bite," came the muttering. "Bite," rose out of the incoherent sounds from below.

"Een . . thees . . house," it said again.

And what a horrible tittering sound! How primitive! thought Ambler in some confusion. His confusion was, however, controlled. He made no betraying sound; whatever it was, menaced him, he was sure.

The silence which fell was as sudden as it was unexpected. It made Theophilus Ambler even more uncomfortable than the

sounds. But what came after was even worse in that sentient darkness.

A new sound now, an incredible sound.

Someone weeping, someone sobbing!

Ambler stood there listening unbelievably. What in God's name had got into the house? He felt his skin crawl; he felt something gnawing at the pit of his stomach; he felt in turmoil, in a wretchedness of undefined fear and a kind of sick loathing, for the sound was so piteous that it was revolting.

The sound of grief diminished, fell away, was gone, and the silence came.

In a little while the familiar signatures of the old house began once more, serenely -the creaking and cracking and groaning, the wind's hush-hush at the eaves, the comfort of mice scamp-
ering about overhead.

Theophilus Ambler retreated noiselessly to his room, where he sat for a long time listening, listening and wondering, before he brought himself to put off his slippers and dressing-gown and return to bed.

He considered inquiring next morning of Fulton whether he had heard anything in the night, but thought better of it. If Fulton had heard, he would find some opportunity to mention it; if he had not, there was no need to alarm him. That would come soon enough, if the experience persisted.

Nevertheless, Theophilus Ambler made a thorough search of the old house. He turned up several articles which had been lost for years, but nothing at all to show that anyone had got into the house during the night. Every door and every window remained locked, just as they had been at bedtime the previous night. Moreover, nothing whatever was in any way disturbed. Could it have

been that one of the Negroes from the other side of town had got drunk and wandered into the neighborhood, finding himself a corner somewhere outside the house from which the sounds, despite the tearing wind, had reached into and through the walls? But no, hardly; that was stretching the bounds of probability too far. Yet it was undeniable that the sounds he had heard in the night might very well have been made by a black.

Theophilus sat for some time in the horsehair-furnished parlor, ostensibly reading, but secretly pondering the problem. With each hour that passed, his perplexity grew. More than once, he gazed meditatively over at that curious peace offering of Ernest's, and at last he went to bring it out into a strong light so that he could examine it closely. Was it his imagination, or was the thing damp?

He looked at it closely.

It had once been a fine head, he decided. Almost Nordic, save for its dark skin and the cut of the mouth. He fingered it judiciously. It seemed that some kind of teeth had been put into it. Very sharp, too. The jaws seemed firm enough. He replaced it on the mantel; his improbable theory was clearly untenable, and he was left more puzzled than ever.

Several times during that day, he found himself regarding the Jivaro head with mixed emotions, uppermost among which was the impulse to rid himself of the object with summary dispatch.

He waited for night with some apprehension.

That night he lay in his dark bedroom at the head of the stairs waiting for untoward sounds, for no wind filled the old house with the familiar noises to which Theophilus had been so long accustomed. The clock struck nine, the clock struck ten, the clock struck eleven. Outside, the town grew quiet toward midnight as

the streets emptied and the last late crowd from the last picture-show dispersed.

Inside the old house on Main Street the voice began again.

Theophilus rose at once; he had not undressed, but had only put on his gown, in one pocket of which he had taken care to place a small pistol. He had put out a strong-beamed flashlight, feeling more secure with it in his hand than candles; and, so armed, he set out from his room, walking with every caution to the head of the stairs and slowly, slowly down, step by step, careful to make no sound.

The voice gibbered in the darkness; the voice complained, argued, cried—a horrible cacophony in the black well below.

Near the bottom of the stairs, Theophilus paused. The atmosphere of menace around him was thick, unpleasant, cloying. Once again, there were audible words, disjointed, almost meaningless.

"Head of . . . stairs room . . . een thees house een . . . third night . . ." And again gibberish, horribly intermingled with sounds of grief.

And what was to be made of that?

The sounds came from the parlor, beyond any question.

Mustering his courage, Theophilus tiptoed down the hall toward the old-fashioned portieres which marked the entrance to the parlor. In the silence which held the house, the sounds seemed twice and three times as loud as they were, so that at any moment Theophilus expected a distraught Fulton to appear at the head of the stairs. But there was no betrayal from above.

He stood before the closed portieres listening. He heard a constant muttering, and, paying careful attention, he detected a pattern of gutturals. Words, certainly. But not English. Words in some alien language. Phonetic, he decided; probably primitive, with now and then an English word. It struck him as very odd

that the heavy accent of the English words was so similar to the less obvious accent Ernest had affected when last he had visited in Euphoria.

His impulse was to retreat, but he would not yield to it.

He did the second-best thing; he effected a compromise. Rather than enter the parlor, he made a small parting of the portieres at the level of his eyes, thrust his flashlight into the opening and, focusing the beam on the mantel, switched it on.

The ivory and ebony figures sprang into being—and the dark brown head, agleam as with perspiration there. It seemed to Theophilus Ambler that there was a burning of tiny eyes, a movement of the shrunken lips. But the instant the light flashed forth, the sounds from within the room ceased.

There was nothing.

But wait—! The head was not where he had put it. When last he had put it down, it was left standing next to an ivory knight; now it stood before a teakwood box—fully a foot and a half away. Could Fulton have moved it? Hardly. Even if he had taken it up, he would have replaced it precisely where it had been.

What then? The possibilities which occurred to him were not comforting. Theophilus was not unimaginative, but he was not inclined to accept the products of his imagination too readily. He looked across the room to the figures illuminated by his flashlight's beam. He could not rid himself of the conviction that one among them gazed back, with malevolence.

He snapped off the light and withdrew, allowing the portieres to close before him. He waited.

Nothing happened.

He was vaguely disconcerted; he had expected the gibbering and muttering to begin again, but no, no untoward sound came out of the parlor. Indeed, the room and the house were as one might expect them to be in the dead of the night.

Theophilus walked back to the stairs. There he waited a while longer. Nothing took place, no unaccountable sound invaded the darkness.

He went slowly up the stairs in the dark, with every step expecting to hear that weird voice again. But he heard nothing; all was as before, except that Fulton was snoring. He's lying on his back again, thought Theophilus. He turned at the head of the stairs and looked back down into the well of black. He had a momentary feeling that someone watched him; he thought he saw a vague, shadowy figure, neck to toes—without a head; but he **blinked and it was gone.**

More shaken than he cared to admit to himself, he re-entered his room. He considered blocking the door with the heavy easy chair in his room, but stoutly refused to give way to a fear so nebulous as that he now entertained. Just to be on the safe side, however, he slipped his pistol under his pillow, and presently he slept after a fashion.

The morning brought more than another day. It brought Ernest Ambler, looking, if possible, more dissipated than ever, with bags under his eyes, and smouldering fire like a fever inside. He was of medium height, stoop-shouldered, and, one might have said, hawk-like in his appearance, except that it did injustice to a noble family of birds. His face was not so much prepossessing as it was fascinating in a revolting way. He looked, and often acted, like a character out of a painting by Felicien Rops, quite as if he had practiced every known major vice and quite a few minor ones.

Theophilus found his nephew at breakfast when the old man descended.

Ernest shot him an unsteady glance. "Hullo, Uncle Theo," he said with false heartiness. "You're looking uncommonly well."

Theophilus growled an acknowledgment. "And you're looking seedy, if I must say so. Puffy."

"It was a long trip."

"I'll bet it was. How'd you make it? In steerage?"

Ernest set forth his trip in patience. He made it commendably short. He had been working among the Jivaro Indians. He had sent up a sample of their work, but apparently it had not yet arrived.

"I got it," said Theophilus shortly.

Ernest seemed manifestly surprised. "Oh," he said. "Oh, you did." He licked his lips. "But surely, not very long ago, eh?"

"Two days ago."

"Then this is actually the . . . the third day you've had it, isn't it?"

A stupid question, thought Theophilus. Small wonder he tittered after it. Still had that disgusting accent, too.

"How the devil did you get along with the Indians, Ernest? Or can you speak their language?"

"I learned it. And I taught some of them English. Oh, I taught them a lot of things, and they taught me. That head I sent you—I can do that sort of thing myself now. And a lot of others."

"Equally reprehensible, no doubt."

Ernest frowned angrily. "You would think so."

"I know the precedents," answered Theophilus curtly. "How long are you planning on staying?"

"Oh, not too long. A week or two, maybe. Then I must go back. I've got quite a reputation among those Indians."

"I can imagine."

"You'll find it hard to believe, but they think I'm a big medicine-man—the equivalent of an African witch-doctor, no less."

He was gloating. He was actually proud of what the Jivaros thought. Theophilus repressed a shudder.

"Congratulations," he said dryly. "And tell me, Ernest, that head you sent me. Did it take you very long?"

"Oh, no just . . ." Ernest caught himself and glared at the old man. "What do you mean?"

"What did you think I meant?" countered Theophilus blandly.

Ernest swallowed. "You always think the worst of me," he muttered.

"Ah, and whose fault is that?" Theophilus got up, leaning above his nephew. He had scarcely touched his coffee, but he no longer had any appetite for it. "If you're staying, Ernest, you take the room next to mine. I have to tell you, though—there appears to be somebody else in the house, besides Fulton and me. You'll find out about that in good time."

Ernest stared after him with narrowed eyes.

Theophilus was profoundly disturbed. He read his nephew's eyes. He read hope, hate, avarice; he read more. And how curiously Ernest had spoken! He was not cringing, as he had formerly done; he was not apologizing or begging; his was an attitude of watchful waiting, an almost irrepressible gloating straying from behind his feverish eyes.

Theophilus continued to be upset at intervals throughout the day. So did Fulton, what with the way in which Ernest presumed to order him about. Ernest managed to surcharge the already troubled atmosphere of the house on Main Street with an explosive chaos. Moreover, as evening approached, Ernest began to get extremely fidgetty, and at last, immediately after supper, rose and left the house, mumbling that he would be back later, and no one needed to be waiting up for him—as if anyone intended to do so.

"The front door will be left open," said Theophilus. And it would be just like Ernest to come in in the midst of a soliloquy from that thing in the parlor, he thought. He half hoped he would do so.

But that night advanced without the disturbance of the past two nights. Theophilus listened for hours. When at last the clock struck eleven, he was tense with listening. He heard the murmur of wind in the trees, the creaking of the house, the scuttering of mice—and, a quarter past the hour, a terrific clatter on the front porch, followed by an assault on the door, which opened and closed, and permitted Theophilus to hear a succession of unsteady footsteps advancing down the hall.

Ernest—and drunk. Theophilus sighed. He might have expected that. He got up, pulling on his dressing-gown. He opened the door of his room and stood there, waiting, listening to Ernest stumbling through the hall, up the stairs. He hoped that Ernest would find his own room.

That hope, however, was not destined to be fulfilled. Seeing the open door, Ernest came into his uncle's room, lurched across to the bed, and flung himself on it. Disgusted, Theophilus walked over and touched him on the shoulder. Ernest looked warily around, bleary-eyed. Seeing Theophilus, his eyes opened wide and closed again, tightly.

"Go 'way," he muttered thickly. "Never wash 'fraid 'v you 'live, n' 'fraid 'v you dead. Go 'way."

Was it worth it? Theophilus wondered. If left alone, Ernest might go to sleep in a matter of seconds; if not, he might become obstreperous and insistently difficult. He stood there for a moment, feeling the chill of the night through his dressing-gown; then he gave up and went out, leaving the door ajar, so that he might hear if Ernest got up again. He could as easily sleep next door, in the room assigned to Ernest, as in his own, much as he disliked being routed from his own warm bed. He supposed he should have taken Ernest's shoes off, but he told himself that he was simply too old a man for that sort of task.

He got into Ernest's bed, profoundly hoping that he might be

able now to sleep without interruption for what remained of the night.

He was.

He woke just as Fulton found him. Fulton, much agitated, his hands almost palsied. He woke quickly.

"Mr. Ambler, sir—Mr. Ernest's on your bed."

"Yes, of course. I let him."

"I'm afraid he's ill, sir."

"Drunk, damn him! Just plain beastly drunk."

Fulton looked apologetically dubious. "But the blood," he said faintly.

"Blood?" echoed Theophilus.

He got up, forgetting his dressing-gown, and walked in his night-shirt as fast as he was able down the hall to his own room.

Fulton had not exaggerated. There was quite a bit of blood, emanating apparently from some puffy wounds on Ernest's neck. Ernest himself was dead; of that there was not the shadow of a doubt. His neck was torn and lacerated, but not fatally, to Theophilus Ambler's untrained eye.

"Call somebody," he said to Fulton.

"The undertaker?" ventured Fulton.

"And the sheriff, too. They'll want to ask questions. They always do."

The sheriff came and asked a good many questions, particularly after a report from the county coroner was in. Ernest Ambler had died of poison, evidently administered through the wounds in his neck. Curare. A poison well-known to certain Indian tribes of South America. As for the wounds in his neck—clearly bites of some kind. Perhaps rats. What did Mr. Theophilus Ambler know about it?

Theophilus was not of much help. But for the fact that he

had not a shred of motive for wanting his nephew out of the way, it might have gone very badly for him and for Fulton. As it was, the absence of evidence failed to constitute anything positive. Two or three times it was on the tip of his tongue to say something about that strange tsantsa on the mantel, but he wisely forebore; he might escape a barred cell for a padded one.

At the first opportunity, however, he examined the blood-stains on the stairs which the men from the sheriff's office had found; there were not many, and they ended half way down the stairs. He went into the parlor. The tsantsa stood on the very edge of the shelf. There was a red-brown smear at one corner of its mouth. Theophilus had not a doubt but that, if he sent away the pointed "teeth" from that monkey-like head, he would find the source of the curare which had killed Ernest.

He had an understandable reluctance to do so.

But something would have to be done about the thing on the mantel. For the time being it could stay where it was—but not for long.

Within a fortnight the mail brought in a letter sent to Theophilus Ambler by the American consul at Cuenca, Ecuador. Did Mr. Ambler have in his possession a shrunk Jivaro head, recently acquired? And if so, would he send it posthaste to the consulate? The consul was sorry, but he had been plagued by a Jivaro woman who had told him a long rigmarole and given him no rest until he sent to inquire. Her husband, whose headless body had been discovered in the garden behind a small house once occupied by Ernest Ambler, who had gone from there, had been murdered by someone—according to her, by Ambler, who had—so she told the consul she had learned from her husband's spectre—performed certain ancient rites in sorcery over the head and dispatched it to a place in America to do a deed, after which the

head would be returned. Now the ghost of the dead Indian appeared nightly to his wife, weeping and clamoring for his head. It was absurd, it was ridiculous, but the consul hoped that Mr. Theophilus Ambler knew how difficult a consul's life could be and might understand.

Theophilus understood very well indeed. The tsantsa had been sent to do a deed—on the third night in the room at the head of the stairs. The incorrigible Ernest had counted on the tsantsa's earlier arrival. Fortunately, Theophilus was in a position to appreciate the irony of the situation, however incredible.

He took no chances with the tsantsa. He packed it carefully and sent it by air to the American consulate at Cuenca.

Balu

Within the week after his father's funeral, Walter moved in with his widowed Aunt Thea. He was now an orphan, but he did not feel any different. True, he had a sense of loss, he missed his father, but not quite everything had been taken from him. He still had Balu, though his aunt and his cousin Harold, who, at eleven, was one year his senior, eyed the great black cat with its intense green eyes with disgust and manifest misgivings, and he was aware, with the instinct peculiar to childhood, that Balu would be the object of their attempts to rid the house of him.

Stout-hearted, he took possession of the room given him, and made a place for Balu, despite his aunt's mild suggestion that perhaps "the cat" could sleep in the basement or the attic, where there were mice.

"This is a special cat," he informed her. "This is Balu. Daddy brought me Balu from Egypt. Balu is like a person, but he's very old. Balu is older than I am; he's older than this house. Daddy said Balu is older than America."

Aunt Thea showed her disapproval, but said nothing.

His trunks followed him—one filled with clothing, the other with books and mementoes of life with his father, his mother having died almost beyond the limits of his memory. He was fair, with curly hair, sturdily built, in contrast to his thin, gangling cousin Harold. He was self-contained, for he had lived a long

time in his father's apartment, while his father had been away on his trips of exploration.

"I hope you will like it here, Walter," said Aunt Thea when he came down to dinner the first night. "We'll try to help you forget your loss."

"Thank you, Aunt Thea," he said gravely.

But he was not deceived. Harold resented him. He did not know how much Aunt Thea was getting for taking care of him, but he suspected she was being well paid. It would be difficult with Harold not liking him, and it would be difficult about Balu. But he meant to survive.

Before he had been in his new home two days, Harold was at him about "that cat." Harold was particularly annoying because of his superior air, as if mere birthdays gave him an intangible edge over Walter.

"My mother says there's nothing different about your cat," he said, perched on Walter's bed.

"There is so," retorted Walter.

"There is not."

"My Daddy got him in Egypt. He ought to know. He got him from some kind of priest. A priest of Thoth, he said. Balu is a very special person."

"A cat can't be a person."

"Balu is."

Balu, curled on top of Walter's bureau, took no notice of the conversation. He made a great, black cushion there, reflected in the mirror. His ears were tufts of black that stood straight up. His whiskers were long and handsome. His eyes were as green as jade. He half sat, half lay, looking coldly into distance far beyond the room's confining walls.

"Besides," continued Harold, sneering, "my mother says Uncle William was queer."

"He was not!"

"He was, too!"

"My Daddy was a great explorer. What was your Daddy?"

Harold could not answer that. He was routed.

Balu raised up, humped his back, stretched himself with infinite grace. He descended, leaped lightly over to Walter, and rubbed against him, muttering a throaty purr. Very plainly, he approved of Walter. He walked carefully, haughtily, around Harold.

"Balu doesn't like you," said Walter soberly.

"I don't like Balu, either."

Harold's second attack came within the week. He came complaining that the servants were frightened of Balu. There were but two, both black. It was true that the blacks were frightened of Balu; they had always been. Walter remembered very well an old Negro who had worked a while for his father. He had shunned the cat; more than that, he had walked carefully all around it. In this house, it was worse because the blacks were women. Women always carried on so. He had heard them. He had heard them say, "Lawdy, dat cat am a witch-cat, hope to die!" He had heard them say, "Dat Balu got de sperit in him way down deep. He old. He old es de world."

"Balu scares old Lou," said Harold. "And Melissa, too."

"Blacks are always scared of Balu," said Walter scornfully.

"You know why?"

"No. Why?"

"Because they know. They know about Balu. Daddy said the blacks could feel things we can't feel. They feel how old Balu is. They feel Balu is special."

"You're talking foolish."

"No, I'm not."

"You are so. You're talking lies, that's what they are."

Walter was outraged. "I never lie. I don't have to. Balu is . . ."

"Balu is an ugly black cat," interrupted Harold, "who ought to be poisoned or something."

"You get out of here —saying things like that!" Walter clenched his fists.

"Who's going to make me?"

"I am."

Balu broke in with a curious sound of anger. His tail was thick, thick as an upraised club.

"If that cat scratches me—I'll kick it," said Harold.

"Balu doesn't scratch."

"Is he any good besides just sitting there?"

"Balu catches mice and rats."

"You feed him plenty from our table," said Harold accusingly.

"I guess that's paid for."

"Anyway, if you don't get rid of that cat, we might lose Lou and Melissa. And if we do, my mother is going to be plenty mad."

"Balu goes where I go," said Walter firmly. "I stay where Balu is."

A muted purr came from Balu, though the cat did not lift its head.

Aunt Thea had noticed the vindictiveness of Harold, and the rift between the boys. She regretted it and fluttered, but she hoped that it would soon be over and done. There would be a period of adjustment; that could not be helped. But, being foolish, she could not help unwittingly abetting Harold by talking carelessly of William Bayle—how fruitless his explorations had been, how queer a man he was, how little attention he had paid to Walter, and so on.

Harold remembered.

It was difficult for Walter. It made him realize how much he missed his father. It brought home to him for the first time that he did not have his father's protection, nor did he have that wonderful freedom to do as he liked, when only the governess had kept a beneficent eye on him, seldom interfering, only guiding gently and keeping him from harm. How he wished sometimes that his father were still alive, and everything were once again as it had been!

One day he caught Harold in his room tormenting Balu. Balu was in a corner, and Harold was throwing books at him—Walter's books. Walter leaped on Harold, beating him with his fists. Harold, trying to escape, fell to the bed.

"You dirty beast!" cried Walter. "If I ever catch you doing that again, I'll—I'll kill you."

Harold recovered his feet, and backed against the wall. "I didn't hurt him," he said sullenly.

Walter went over to Balu, stroking the cat, petting him, talking to him. Over his shoulder he said, "Get out of my room."

"This is *our* house—not yours," said Harold defiantly.

Walter turned on his haunches and glared at him. "Get out!"

Harold sidled toward the door and vanished.

Walter looked to his cat once more. "Did he hurt you, Balu?"

Balu seemed to understand. Balu came to him, rubbing against him, purring.

He felt Balu all over. The cat flinched at no touch; so he was not hurt. He began to pick up the books Harold had thrown. "I'll kill him," he muttered balefully.

Balu's tail switched from side to side. He nuzzled one of Walter's fingers. He licked the back of Walter's hand.

Thereafter, he would not confine Balu to his room. Balu went with him everywhere. He disdained to notice the cowering blacks, though it was extraordinary the way they flattened to the wall when Balu passed, the way they muttered strange gibberish under their breath. In a confiding moment, Harold told him that the black delivery boys from down-town stores no longer stopped to talk, but left their baskets and were off; they had heard about Balu. They believed Balu had strange powers.

Aunt Thea was upset and angry, but there was William's money to consider. While she was not indigent, it meant a good deal to her. Somehow, for all his extravagance and carelessness, William Bayle had managed to gather a lot of money, and she meant to have all she could before Walter reached his majority.

Harold found ways to trouble Walter.

If they played tennis in the court behind the house, and Balu was there, Harold managed at least once each time to bat the ball at the cat. Walter knew he did it on purpose, but he could not prove it; invariably, he stopped playing immediately, went sulking to the house, morose with anger he could not vent upon his cousin.

If they sat inside playing cards or any other household game, Balu beside them, Harold never missed an opportunity to step on Balu's tail. Curiously, the cat never screamed, but only drew away and licked its tail, and Walter's cries of rage were ended by his aunt's defense of Harold. "Anyone could see it was just an accident, Walter," she said, time after time. But Walter knew it was no accident.

When he ignored Harold, his cousin came to his room. Always at him about Balu . .

"That cat scared Melissa so today she busted a dozen eggs . . ."

"That cat hasn't caught a mouse since she was here. Two whole months, almost three . . ."

"That cat's been sharpening her claws on our good furniture. . ."

"Mother says your dad wasn't quite all there . . ."

But in the end, Harold returned to methods more direct.

Thinking Walter at the dentist's one afternoon, he invaded Walter's room with an ingenious weapon—a toasting fork extended and tied to a broom-handle. Carefully securing doors and windows, so that the cat could not escape to the hall or the adjoining store-room, where it might find shelter among old boxes and trunks, Harold got after Balu.

He had inflicted two gashing wounds when Walter came.

When Walter had finished with Harold, Harold had several long scratches and gashes from his own improvised weapon, and in his vindictiveness, Harold blamed the wounds upon Balu, so that Aunt Thea talked to Walter and insisted that Balu must be "done away with". Walter stood his ground, but told no word of Harold's perfidy.

In the night he was awakened by Balu's insistence.

The cat lay on his belly on the bed, his green eyes shining in the dark.

"What is it, Balu?"

The cat purred commandingly. One paw pulled at the covering sheet, his tail switching impatiently back and forth. "Come and see," he seemed to say.

Walter stirred.

Balu leaped to the floor and stood waiting, turned to see whether Walter was coming.

Walter put on the light and watched the cat jump up to the

bookcase. On the second shelf a book jutted forth. Balu clawed downward, and the book fell to the floor. Balu came after, walking back and forth across the opened book.

Walter came down to his knees and gazed at it. It was his father's Egyptian book with his pencilled notes. *Book of the Dead*. He gazed at Balu, walking impatiently back and forth. Clearly Balu expected something of him. He began to page through the book, and at once Balu came to sit opposite him, intent upon his paging.

Abruptly, Balu thrust forth a paw, laid it upon a page, and looked at him. The cat's green eyes seemed to swim before him, to enlarge. They were pools, ponds, oceans, and within them moved a strange procession of all manner of beings—ancient men in Egyptian garb, wearing masking head-dresses, the priests of Bast, winged creatures and four-footed ones, cats, and men, men and cats through ages past. The illusion passed.

Walter bent to read his father's notes.

What he read was stranger still. He read it carefully, over and over, memorizing it. He tried to understand. What it said was something about transforming one person into another. The words were there, the directions were given.

Balu watched him intently.

Walter put the book back in its place and pondered. He went to bed and dreamed—dreamed of great gulfs of time and space, of towering pyramids and ancient men, of things beyond his knowledge, things lost in far time.

Three days later he invited Harold to his room to play a game.

"What kind of game is it?" asked Harold.

"It's a new game," said Walter. "It's a transforming game."

"I never played it before."

"No, I guess you never did."

Harold trooped along to the room and looked at the changes Walter had made. "Gee, you moved things around a little!"

"I had to."

"What're those circles for?"

"They're part of the game."

"You'll catch it—chalking up the floor."

"Now you stand here, Harold, in the middle of this circle, and Balu has to sit in the middle of the other one—like this."

"Does that cat know how to play this game?"

"Yes, he does. Balu's very smart, Harold. Balu's smarter than I am or you are. He's smarter than anybody is."

"Oh, cut that out. That's not part of this game."

"I guess in a way it is."

"Well, what next?"

"Now I have to kneel in front of you and say some words, and then something happens."

"Aw, stuff!"

"Really it does. Harold, please, just stay and play it once."

"Well, all right."

Walter hoped that he had understood his father's notes. Balu sat attentively in one of the chalked circles, and Harold stood in the other. Harold looked curiously at all the little signs and hieroglyphs Walter had copied.

"What're those things?"

"They're part of the game."

"What are they?"

"I don't know, really, Harold. It's just part of the game. You're supposed to do it that way."

"I'm going to be twelve next week. I'm getting too old to play kids' games."

"Now, listen."

He read. He intoned words.

For a moment nothing happened. Then abruptly the cat leaped into the air, tail thick, every hair taut and extended. He began to spit and claw the air; his tongue stuck from between his teeth, and the sounds that rose from his throat were like bestial, half articulate human words. But no words came.

Shaken, Walter looked at Harold.

But Harold was somehow different. There was a light in his eyes that had never been there before. His eyes were—like Balu's eyes. As Walter looked, Harold sank to his knees, then to his belly. Stretched out flat, he leaned forward and licked Walter's hand.

When, after a long period of silence, while Walter was confining the cat that had once been Balu, and accustoming himself to Harold in his transformation, Aunt Thea could no longer ignore the absence of the boys and called to find out where they were, Walter answered, somewhat tremulously.

"Up here, Aunt Thea."

"Up where, Walter?"

"In my room."

"Is Harold there, too?"

"Yes, Aunt Thea."

"What on earth is he doing?"

Walter swallowed and said that Harold was reading. He could not very well tell Aunt Thea what Harold was doing. At the moment Harold was in the storeroom catching mice. Walter hoped earnestly that the early hangovers from the previous incarnation would soon be lost, or else Aunt Thea might ask him questions he could not answer. Yet he felt that he could count on Balu.

When Aunt Thea wrote her next monthly letter to the executor of William Bayle's estate, an estimable Southern gentleman who saw to it that she was paid for Walter's keep, she could not

resist a paragraph about the changed circumstances of the household.

"You will be delighted to learn that the boys, who were once so quarrelsome, get along beautifully together now. It is so inspiring to witness such a transformation. Harold, who had not been kind to Walter, I must admit, now seems actually to fawn upon him—not disgustingly, of course; but certainly he is extremely fond of his cousin. And Walter, now that we have had to dispose of his cat, (which apparently went into fits one day in his room and could not be brought out of them), has the somewhat quaint habit of calling Harold *Balu*, after his cat. Oddly enough, the servants, who once adored Harold, now seem to be unable to tolerate his presence. But, I suppose, one must expect blacks to be a little queer . . ."

The Extra Passenger

Mr. Arodias had worked a long time on his plan to kill his eccentric uncle, and he was very proud of it. But then, Mr. Arodias was a very clever man; he had lived by his wits for so many years that it had never been necessary for him to kill Uncle Thaddeus before. Only, now that Mr. Arodias was getting along toward middle age, and his fingers were no longer so nimble as they had once been, the time came. He began by thinking that he ought not to be deprived of his inheritance any longer, and ended up by working out the perfect crime which he defied Scotland Yard to solve.

Like all such plans, it was almost absurdly simple, and Mr. Arodias indulged in many a self-congratulatory chuckle when he contemplated the bumbling efforts of the C. I. D. to solve it. Uncle Thaddeus, who was a recluse, lived on the edge of Sudbury, which was on the Aberdeen line from London. Three squares from his tree-girt house lived another solitary who owned a fast car and kept it carelessly in an unlocked shed some distance from his house. Thirty miles from Sudbury, where the night train to Aberdeen stopped, lay the hamlet of East Chelmsly, the next stop, rather in a curving line from Sudbury, so that it was farther by rail than by highway. It would be a simple matter to take off for Aberdeen from London on the slow night train, slip out of his compartment at Subury, "take care" of Uncle Thaddeus, then appropriate his neighbor's fast car, and arrive in East Chelmsly in

adequate time to slip back on to his train, with none the wiser. A perfect alibi! Ah, what chuckle-heads he would make of the ladies from the Yard!

Moreover, it worked like a charm. True, the old man had recognized him and had muttered something about coming after him before the light in his crafty eyes went out and his battered head fell forward—but it was just a matter of moments; the whole thing had been rehearsed in Mr. Arodias's mind so often that he knew just what to do, and flattered himself by thinking that he could have done it blindfolded. The old dodderer nearby had left his car plentifully supplied with petrol, too, as if he had been an accomplice, and it took Mr. Arodias to East Chelmly in the dead of night, never meeting anyone on the long road, never seeing anyone in the little hamlets through which he passed. He arrived in East Chelmly in excellent time, and like a shadow he slipped around to the station and into his compartment with no one seeing.

No one, that is, except the extra passenger.

For at this point in his perfect crime, Mr. Arodias came face to face with a factor for which he had made no provision. He had left his compartment empty, save for his bags and golf-clubs; he came back to it to find huddled in the opposite seat, with his hat well down over his face, an extra passenger. It was possible that the fellow had not marked Mr. Arodias's entrance, but, much to his annoyance, Mr. Arodias could not be sure.

"Sorry to disturb you," he said genially. "I have been in the lavatory."

No answer.

Mr. Arodias hawked once or twice.

No sign of life.

Mr. Arodias settled back, relieved, feeling very comfortable and secure. This pleasant feeling of security did not last, however. In

a few moments he was asking himself where in the devil the extra passenger had come from? There had been no stop between Sudbury and East Chelmsly. The compartment was in one of the other coaches, not a local. It was barely possible that a passenger from one of the other compartments had mistaken Mr. Arodias's for his own in the dark, and now occupied it by mistake. For it was still dark, being somewhat past midnight, and the lights in the corridor were dim.

But this explanation did not satisfy Mr. Arodias, and he was possessed of a normal dislike of unsatisfactory matters. This was all the more true when the matter in question represented a potential flaw in what he felt was a very perfect plan. His fellow-traveler, however, was apparently oblivious of his growing perturbation; he continued to huddle there without movement other than that of the train rushing through the night. This troubled Mr. Arodias; he expected nothing less than a full account explaining the extra passenger's presence.

Failing this, he began to imagine all kinds of things, and he took every opportunity to examine his companion in the light of passing stations. He wore heavy, almost loutish shoes. Obviously a countryman. His hands, which did not seem clean, were those of an old man. His hat had seen much roughing. Of his face, Mr. Arodias saw nothing. How long, he wondered, had he been sleeping? If he had just simply blundered into the compartment and settled down and dozed right off, all would be well. But if he had not done so, he might well be in a position to ask annoying questions about what kept Mr. Arodias in the lavatory for time enough to enable the train to put close to sixty or seventy miles behind from the time he had entered the lavatory—which was, of course, presumably at the same hour the extra passenger had entered Mr. Arodias's compartment.

This thought needled Mr. Arodias with desperation. Already he had visions of some officious bumpkin plodding to the police station in Aberdeen and solemnly deposing that Mr. Arodia's late entrance was a suspicious circumstance. He could see it in cold print. "*Sudbury Victim's Heir Questioned*," the headline would read. And this unwelcome stranger, huddled there like a tangible threat to his security, would have put all his suspicions down. "'E come late into 'is seat, an' I could na 'elp wonderin' where the zur kep' 'imself all that time. A good hour, 't was. Nor did 'e 'ave the look of a zick man about 'im."

Mr. Arodias could hardly contain himself. He coughed loudly. Fancying that he saw a movement about his fellow traveler not inspired by the train, he said hastily, "Forgive me. I didn't mean to awaken you."

But there was no answer.

Mr. Arodias bit his lip. "I say," he said firmly.

Silence.

The sounds of the train filled the compartment—the whistle up ahead, the rush of steam, the clicking of the drivers—filled the room and rolled around in it, swelling and growing. It was grotesque. It made such a sound that it would have awakened the dead, thought Mr. Arodias. Yet the extra passenger slept calmly through it, huddled there like someone lost in the deepest dream.

He leaned forward and tapped the fellow on the knee.

"Look here, this is my compartment, you know."

No answer.

Oh, it was maddening! Especially so for a man of Mr. Arodias's temperament, and most particularly since this was happening just after he had brought off what was certain to come out in the end as his most successful coup in a career of successes. This confounded extra passenger was by his very presence, however in-

nocuous he might be, taking the edge of enjoyment off his pleasure in his accomplishment of that night.

Mr. Arodias considered shaking the fellow.

But this he dismissed from his mind within a few moments. There was, after all, no good in antagonizing him. There was no reason to believe that he had seen a single thing which might make him suspicious. Indeed, he might leave the compartment at any place along the line without once realizing that he sat in the same train with the heir to the Sudbury recluse. No, there was absolutely no good in unnecessarily attracting attention to himself.

He felt frustrated, and he redoubled his efforts to examine his fellow traveler. He took the trouble, finally, to take out his pipe, fill it, and strike a match, rather more for the purpose of examining the extra passenger in its flickering light than for that of lighting his pipe. Then for the first time he observed that the fellow had no baggage of any kind. Manifestly then, he had stumbled into the wrong compartment. The shoes were country shoes, all right. Clod-hopperish. Mud on them, too. And on his hands. Uncouth fellow.

Or was it mud? The match went out.

Mr. Arodias was afraid to light another. For one cataclysmic moment, the stuff on his fellow traveler's hands and shoes had looked like blood! Mr. Arodias swallowed and told himself that he was having hallucinations stemming from some rudimentary conscience which had not died with the rest of it in that long ago time when he had entered upon his life of dubious practises and crime.

He sat for a long moment in silence. The hour was now past two in the morning. He busied himself for a little while peering out of the window, trying to ascertain just where the train was at the moment. Approaching the Scottish border, he decided. He

closed his eyes and tried to think how he must act when they found him in Aberdeen and told him his Uncle Thaddeus was dead, slain by an unknown assailant in the night, while he was on his way to Scotland under the protection of such a perfect alibi. But there was nothing to be gained in thinking about this; he had decided upon his course of action right up to the moment he actually took possession of his inheritance—he had decided upon that long ago; it was all an integral part of his plan. Indeed, the only incident which was not integral to his plan was this extra passenger.

He turned to him again, hawked once more, coughed loudly, knocked his pipe out on the windowsill, and looked hopefully over through the darkness of the compartment at that huddled old fellow in the corner of his seat.

No movement.

"This has gone far enough," he said aloud, becoming vexed. Silence.

He leaned over once more and tapped his companion on the knee, with some persistence. "Look here, you're in the wrong compartment, sir."

This time he got an answer. It was a muttered, sleepy, "No."

The voice was guttural, broken. Mr. Arodias was slightly disconcerted but in one way relieved.

"I'm sorry," he said, in a more pleasant tone, "but I believe you got into my compartment by mistake."

"No," said his companion again.

Instantly annoyed once more, Mr. Arodias wondered why the fellow insisted on talking from beneath his hat.

"Where did you get on the train?" he asked with some asperity.

"In Sudbury."

Sudbury! Of course! That could have been. Why had he not

thought of that? He had been in such a hurry to get off the train he had not thought that someone might get on. He was about to speak again when his companion added a catastrophic afterthought.

"Where you got off," he said.

After but a moment of cold shock, Mr. Arodias rallied. "Yes, I stepped out for a breath of air, and then went to the lavatory when I got back."

"I thought," the old man went on with a burr of dialect in his voice, just as Mr. Arodias had imagined, "you might have gone to see your uncle."

Mr. Arodias sat quite still. Faced with this challenge, his mind worked with the speed of lightning. Within ten seconds Mr. Arodias decided that, whoever he was, the extra passenger must never leave the night train alive. He might know nothing at all of the crime, but he nevertheless knew enough to hang Mr. Arodias. He knew enough, indeed; he knew Mr. Arodias, he knew he had got off at Sudbury, and no doubt he knew he had reappeared in his compartment in the vicinity of East Chelmsly. That was enough to doom one of them, and Mr. Arodias, having got this far, had no intention of being doomed.

Mr. Arodias needed time, and he was now quite willing to spar for it until he had evolved some plan for eliminating this menacing old fellow and dumping his body somewhere along the right-of-way.

"You know my uncle?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Ay, quite well."

"I don't know him too well myself. I'm a Londoner, and he keeps to his own place in the country."

"Ay. He has reasons, you might say."

Mr. Arodias pricked up his ears. "What reasons?" he asked bluntly.

"A pity you don't know."

"I don't," said Mr. Arodias, irritated.

"A pity you didn't know a bit more."

"If there's something about my uncle I ought to know, I would like to hear it."

"Ay, you shall. Your uncle's a mage."

"A mage?" Mr. Arodias was mystified.

"A warlock, then, if you like that better."

Mr. Arodias was amazed. He was also touched with a kind of macabre amusement. He did not know why the fact that the old man's fellow villagers regarded him as a warlock should amuse him; yet it did. Even in his amusement he did not lose sight of his decision that this prying oldster must die, and he was contemplating whether he should dispatch him with a quick blow or two or whether he should stifle his out-cries and strangle him. The important thing, of course, was to prevent the guard from hearing anything suspicious. Meanwhile, he must carry on. Best to humor the extra passenger.

"Warlock, eh? And no doubt he has some special talents?" He caught himself just in time to prevent his saying "had"; it would never do to refer to Uncle Thaddeus in the past tense—just in case something went wrong and his curious fellow-traveler got away after all.

"Ay, that he had."

"Foretold the weather, no doubt."

"That any gibbering fool could do."

"Told fortunes, then?"

"A gipsy's trade! Not he! But then, you always did under-rate him."

"Did I, now?"

"Ay."

"What was so wonderful about his being a warlock—if he was."

"Oh, he was. Never a doubt about that. He had his familiar, too—on wings."

"Wings?"

"Ay. He brought me to the train."

Mr. Arodias looked askance. A kind of premonitory tingle crept up his spine. He blinked and wished the light were a little stronger. There was beginning to be something uncomfortably challenging about his chosen victim; Mr. Arodias did not like it.

"And he could send about a lich or two, if he had a mind to."

"A lich?" said Mr. Arodias in a dry voice. "What the devil's that?"

"You don't know?"

"I wouldn't ask you if I did."

"It's a corpse, that's what."

"Send it about? What are you talking about?" demanded Mr. Arodias, feeling a chill along his arms.

"Ay—for a special purpose. Oh, your uncle was a great one for things like that."

"Special purpose," repeated Mr. Arodias, and at that moment his foot touched upon a sturdy weight which had the feel of a sashweight, and he bent to take it in his hand. Yes, it would do; it would do very well; and it was getting to be high time that he used it, because there was something horrible and terrible about that huddled figure.

"A special purpose," said the extra passenger. "Like this one."

Mr. Arodias was suddenly aware that his traveling companion had been speaking of his uncle for the past few minutes in the past tense. A kind of constriction seized upon his throat; but his fingers tightened upon the weight in his hand. The extra passenger knew or guessed far too much; whatever the risk, he must die now—quickly. He leaned forward, stealthily, as if he thought that

the old fellow could see him despite the darkness and the hat over his face.

Then he snatched the hat away, and aimed his first blow.

It did not fall.

The head under that hat was hardly half a head—smashed in, and with the blood run down all over the face—the head of his Uncle Thaddeus! A scream rose and died in Mr. Arodias's throat.

The eyes in that battered head were looking at him, and they were shining as if lit by the fires of hell.

No word, no sound passed Mr. Arodias's lips; he was incapable of speech, of movement. A power, a force beyond Mr. Arodias's comprehension emanated from the thing on the seat opposite. The eyes held him, the eyes encompassed him, the eyes drew him. Mr. Arodias shrank together and slipped from the seat to his knees on the floor of the compartment. As in a dream he heard the sounds of the train, coming as if from very far away.

"Come to me, Simon," said the thing that had been his Uncle Thaddeus.

And Simon Arodias crept across the floor and groveled.

"Bring your face closer, Simon."

And Simon Arodias raised his head, with a harsh whimpering sound struggling for utterance in his throat. Powerless to move, he watched one of the thick bloody hands of the extra passenger come down like a vise upon his face. Then he saw nothing more, and heard the sound of the night train like the sound of doom **thundering in his ears.**

The guard who found Mr. Arodias collapsed from shock.

The medical examiner at Aberdeen was upset for a week. Nevertheless, despite the condition of Mr. Arodias's face—what was left of it—it was ascertained that he had been suffocated—"by per-

son or persons unknown". Circumstances notwithstanding, Mr. Arodias could not have committed suicide.

As for those fumbling chuckle-heads at Scotland Yard—they had already found the gloves which Mr. Arodias had discarded on his way from the stolen car abandoned in East Chelmly to the station, the gloves which were to lead them all in good time to the little plot of ground where Mr. Arodias was enjoying, not his Uncle Thaddeus's money, but his own just due.

The Wind in the Lilacs

When the train drew into Castleton, Miss Alice Glennon looked anxiously out of a coach window to see whether anyone was there to meet her. Being strange to Castleton, she did not wish to be left to find her own way to her sister-in-law's house. She was already regretting her impulse to come all this way just to visit; Emma had never been very close to her, but then, of course, they had been separated by half a dozen States or more—all the way from Missouri to this Vermont hill town. But there was a buggy there, and that was surely Emma sitting in it, sedate and upright. She waved a gloved hand at the pane, but Emma was looking neither to left nor right, but simply staring straight ahead of her at a place along the platform where she presumed the train would draw up the coaches.

She got off the train, and this time Emma saw her. Without thinking that it was strange of Emma not to have come down out of the buggy, Alice walked rapidly over to where her sister-in-law waited and, handing up her luggage, got into the buggy. The two women exchanged perfunctory kisses.

"I'm sorry not to have been down there helping you with that suitcase and all," said Emma. "But my back's been lame, and it's quite a little effort to get in and out of the buggy. I'd have sent Teresa, but you don't know her and she don't know you, so that wouldn't have been any use."

"Oh, I'm just glad to be here," said Alice. "That long train ride!"

"I don't doubt it. It's more'n I would do, I can tell you that." She pulled at the reins and clucked at the horse. "Git around there, git for home."

Alice looked sideways at her sister-in-law. Emma had always been a large woman. Junoesque, she thought, was the word for Emma. Now, however, in the interval since last she had seen her—four years—she seemed larger than before, though it might have been that she, Alice, had shrunk, for she had lost weight, worrying about Benjamin, and all. Emma had red arms, well-fleshed, and huge hands which looked as if by their force alone she might stop the horse in its tracks. Her face was flushed by the late Spring heat, for the sun shone very hot in a cloudless sky; even in the train Alice had felt the heat; so it was no wonder that Emma, sitting there in the buggy right out in the sun, should show it. There were beads of perspiration along Emma's thick upper lip and following the line of her hair from one temple to the other.

"Is it far?" asked Alice presently.

"Oh, not what I'd call far," said Emma. "It ain't rightly in town, but it ain't rightly out of it, either. It was a farm once, but now the other buildings are gone; there's just the house and one or two sheds, that's all. Such a big house, too! I don't know what made Ben build it so big."

But I know, thought Alice. He expected to raise a family. Perhaps that was why he ran off three years ago without anything but that note he left for Emma. She said nothing for a few moments. Then she remarked, "From the picture Ben sent just before he run off, it looked like a real pretty place."

"Well, I suppose it is that," said Emma grudgingly. "There's some that likes it real well. They're always coming to buy it, but it ain't for sale."

"Why not?" asked Alice innocently.

"Because I can't sell it," said Emma fiercely, so that Alice was surprised. "It's the law. I asked about it. It'll be four more years yet, and then, if I ain't heard from Ben, they can declare him legally dead, and then I'll get the house, and once it's mine, I can do with it what I like."

"Will you sell it then?"

An odd sort of expression flared up in Emma's eyes, and her mouth got a sullen set to it. "I don't know," she said. "Time 'll tell that."

"Well, it's nice your sister could stay with you. It must be mighty lonesome without somebody."

Emma looked at her as much as to say that if Alice could stand living alone, surely she could, too. Alice was silent now, confident that the house could not be far away. She was beginning to feel the warmth of the sun despite the fragrant air flowing in and about the buggy in its passage down the dusty street. Castleton, she thought, from what she saw of it, was a pretty town. More trees than most Missouri towns. It takes the old towns to have and keep the trees, she thought. Ben had always liked the trees, too.

"I don't suppose," she said finally, "you've had any word."

"No, I haven't," said Emma.

"Nor I, either. It does seem strange. Of course, pa always said Ben was a kind of queer one, different from the rest of us. And why he run off like that, nobody could tell. Might be even Ben couldn't."

But Emma said nothing, only sniffing a little, as if to show as much as she thought she dared the contempt she felt for a man like that.

Alice thought that Emma must now be forty-two, and the sister, Teresa, who was six years older, as Ben had written her just

before he went, would be forty-eight, then. The two of them had been living together in the house since that time. How would I feel, she wondered, if a husband of mine ran off like that? Would I think to blame it on having no children when he wanted them so? Or was Ben a hard man to live with? She reflected that one seldom really knew people, not really, even living with them.

They came to the house at last, a white frame building with green shutters and a picket fence around it. There were trees, too, handsome old elms. The house was just on the outskirts of town, on the western edge. There was a little grape arbor off to the east, near to the pump and the sheds, facing town; and on the west a kind of little walk arbores over by lilacs. But, as she got out of the buggy and turned to help Emma down, she noticed that the western half of the big house seemed unoccupied; all the shutters were in place, and all the slats closed.

"Oh, you're just living in half of the house," she said.

"Yes," said Emma hurriedly. "No sense to keeping it all up. Of course, we ain't got that half *locked* up. But there's plenty room for you in our half. We're letting you have the downstairs bedroom. Teresa and I can sleep upstairs just this while. How long do you figure on staying, Alice?"

"Oh, not long," said Alice hastily, somewhat startled by the abruptness and intentness of the query.

Teresa came out to meet them. She was thin and angular. She wore her hair tightly drawn to her head and pugged in the back, high off her neck. Her face was plain, and she dressed plainly, too, in brown broadcloth. The only ornament of her entire person was a small brooch. She seemed to be quite strong, however, for she lifted Alice's heavy suitcase without trouble.

"It's a long time since we had visitors," she said conversation-

ally. "Not since Ben left. Ain't none left of our folks, and Ben's are all so far away. It's real nice you come."

"Well, I wanted to come," said Alice.

She intercepted a glance between the sisters. How strange it was! It seemed almost as if a flash of apprehension passed between them. But at once Teresa said something to Emma about her back, and Alice supposed it was that which she was concerned about.

Yet a feeling of strangeness persisted. She almost wished she hadn't come. They were polite and friendly enough, but just the same, she felt sure, by supper time, that she wasn't wanted, and she resolved to cut the week short by two days or so, and return home. That would give her a little time to visit in Boston, which she had planned to do if possible. So she did not mind, though she was curious. Perhaps the two women had lived for so long alone that they did not care for visitors.

After supper she thought that the women would naturally want to get out of the stuffy house and sit on the front porch, but no, they did not, and when Alice proposed it, Emma said stiffly that they were not in the habit of "making a show" of themselves.

"Oh, I don't see making a show of just sitting on the porch minding your own business," said Alice.

"There's some that does and some that don't," said Emma shortly.

She was sewing, and she did not look up.

"Well, I feel as if I'd like to get out," said Alice. "I'm used to stretching my limbs a little before I go to bed."

"Go ahead then," said Emma.

"It's nicest on the east side of the house, I always think," said Teresa quickly, nervously.

"Yes, it is that," said Emma in a flat, toneless voice. "There's broken ground on the west. And now it's getting dark, it's hard

walking." Without looking up, she added, "I'd go along, but my back, you know."

"And I've got to get this darning done," said Teresa.

"Don't you stir. I'll not be gone long," said Alice.

She went out. It was strange indeed that neither of them had accompanied her. It seemed more as if they did not want to go out of the house at all; they were eager not to go. Yes, that was the word—"eager". They were a queer pair, all right. Funny that Ben should have married Emma at all. But Ben always did queer things, like running off the way he did.

That was three years ago now.

Judging by the way things looked, Emma and Teresa had had a hard time making ends meet. Ben's insurance and the house wouldn't come to Emma, just as she said, until seven years after Ben disappeared, unless they had word from him. And Ben was that stubborn, he likely wouldn't write until the very last year.

Quite deliberately, she walked around the back of the house to the west side. The afterglow still lingered low along the west. There was a bank of clouds there, just a few degrees above the horizon; the clouds above and the earth beneath were very dark, almost jet black, so that the band of saffron and lemon and emerald was all the brighter between. Robins were still singing, and mourning doves made their melancholy coos from various places.

She walked leisurely toward the lilac grove, thinking, There must be lilacs in bloom there. She smelled them as she drew up to the bushes, and stepped among them gratified at the perfume of the blossoms. She stood there looking among the slender limbs and boles toward the west, watching the afterglow fade.

A little wind was rising. She heard it rustling the leaves of the lilac bushes; she expected any moment to feel it. The wind made a hushing susurration in the leaves of the lilacs, and a few little

flowers fluttered down. Listening to it, she fancied that it made a sighing sound in the bushes, a sort of *ab-whsss*—quite as if they were breathing. How regular it was!

The lilacs were trembling in the wind now. Along the west, the afterglow was a light pink and lemon. The trees stood silent and tall against it, black and cleanly cut against that band of glowing heaven. But somehow, somewhere, there was something wrong with what she saw, something that should not be. What was it? Perplexed, she stared. Why, it was the trees! The trees should not be standing straight and tall and silent. The trees should be moving in the wind, which she could feel gratefully now with every fiber of her body, pulling at her, cooling her.

But the trees against the afterglow moved not at all. Not so much as a leaf trembled there, not a twig shuddered—nothing moved.

She turned toward the house, looking to the syringa bush which stood in the light of the kitchen window. Was it moving? Was the wind rising in the east, blowing westward? But no, the syringa stood as still as the trees along the west.

A chill touched her arms.

The wind in the lilacs went *ab-whsss, ab-whsss, ab-whsss*.

Suddenly she felt scared. She picked up her skirts and ran out of the bushes toward the house, and instantly, the moment she broke free of the bushes, she was sharply aware of the drug-like heat which lay in the air from the day.

Half-way to the house, she paused. She turned. Now the lilacs were against the afterglow, and she could see how the leaves shook and trembled, and how the bushes moved—almost imperceptibly, to be sure; but they moved. She stood there looking as if she could not believe her eyes, but then she turned her back on the lilacs, went around and into the house by way of the kitchen door.

Both the women looked up at her entrance. Their dark eyes challenged her. Emma had tipped the lamp a little away from her, so that more of the light would fall upon Alice when she sat down.

"What is it? What's the matter?" whispered Teresa.

Alice swallowed. "It's the lilacs," she said in a weak voice.

"What about the lilacs?" demanded Emma brusquely.

"They moved."

"A wind coming up," said Teresa in a thick voice. "What a blessing! It's been hot for May."

"Very hot," echoed Emma.

"But there wasn't anything else stirring," said Alice. "I looked. Not a leaf anywhere, on either side . . ."

"I suppose a wind's got to start somewhere," said Emma bluntly. She thrust a needle and thread at her. "Will you thread this for me, Alice? My eyes are getting tired, I guess."

Alice wanted to say more, but she was too much aware that the women were waiting for her to speak. It would not do any good. She was mystified. She sat with them for a little while, saying inconsequential things, at which they were relieved, and then, when Teresa got up to go to bed, she got up, too.

In the morning the kitchen looked bright and cheery, not at all as it had looked the night before, with the darkness pressing in on the lamp, and the June-bugs striking the screens at the windows, and the memory strong of the wind in the lilacs. Now the sunlight flooded the little room, and the sisters seemed bright and cheerful.

"I suppose we ought to take you through the town," said Emma, "but the truth is, we don't go out very much, only when we have to go to the store and have nobody to run there for us."

"Well, I didn't come to see the town," said Alice. "I came to see you. I planned to stay for a week, but I want to get to Boston, too, and see my Great-uncle Will; so I'll probably leave before then."

"We're glad to have you," said Emma.

"We don't get many visitors," said Teresa. "But if you must go, why then there's no good trying to change your mind."

After breakfast she went outside. She went around the house deliberately. The grove of lilacs stood beautiful with blossoms in the sun. All but one of the bushes bore purple lilacs; the one bore white blooms. The bees made a humming in the blossoms. She walked to their fragrance, under the lilacs into their pleasant shade. The bushes arched above her head she saw now, though she had not noticed the previous night.

A leaf rustled—and another. Then there were others, and suddenly all the leaves were agitated and troubled, turning this way and that, as if a wind was there among them. And surely it was, for once again came that whispering sound—*ab-whsss, ab-whsss, ab-whsss*.

Suddenly she caught her breath; her hand sped to her throat.

Was it indeed *ab-whsss* she heard—or was it *A-lice*?

Instantly it seemed to her that the very air throbbed with her name, repeated over and over. She clapped her hands to her ears and stumbled out of the bushes into the sunlight, where, turning, she gazed back at the shuddering lilacs in terror.

As she watched, the swaying diminished, the susurrations of the leaves faded and died away, the bushes were still. Then she noticed that the angry humming of the bees which had risen with the disturbance of the blossoms was subsiding, too.

She stood looking for a long time. There was something terrible there. She felt it.

She went around the house, resolved to speak once more to the sisters, but when she saw their grim, expectant faces, she choked down her words and tried to appear casual.

"It's hot again," she said.

"Yes, it is," said Emma.

She leaned up against the wall with her hands flat to the cool wall behind her.

"I declare, you're white as a sheet," said Teresa, agitated.

"It's the heat," said Emma.

"No, it's not the heat," retorted Alice. "It's the wind in the lilacs, that's what it is." She took a step forward. "There's something wrong in this house, that's what. What is it?"

"I don't know what notion's got into you, Alice," said Emma.

"What is it?" asked Alice again. "Why have you got that west side all closed up? Is it so you can't see and hear the lilacs?"

No one said anything in reply.

"Why don't you talk to me? Why don't you answer me?"

Emma broke silence at last. "It's because we don't know what to say to you. You talk like—like a crazy person, Alice."

"I swear to you the bushes talked to me. I swear it."

Teresa looked dubiously at Emma. "I think maybe if Alice had a little tea—good and strong—?"

"Yes. Yes, that's just the thing," said Emma.

Her tension passed. She swallowed; her throat was dry. "I'd like a little tea," she said weakly, coming forward to sit down.

"I'll make you some," said Emma.

She got up quickly and moved into the pantry.

"Your back's better," said Alice. "That's good."

"Some better," admitted Emma in a muffled voice from the pantry.

Teresa sat down across the table from her. "Castleton's a little town, Alice. If they heard you talking like that about the lilac

bushes, why, they'd just think you were plumb crazy."

"I'm not crazy," said Alice.

"No, you know that and we know it, but would they know it?" asked Teresa, her dark eyes wide and staring at her.

"I'm not crazy," said Alice again.

Emma came with the tea, steaming. There had been water boiling on the stove all along. She brought along two other cups and poured tea into them after she had served Alice.

"It's bitter," said Alice.

"That's because it's herb tea. It soothes your nerves. Mother always gave it to us, and it was always good for us." She drank deeply herself, grimacing. "It *is* strong. If it's too strong for you, I'll thin it a little."

She held out her hand for Alice's cup, but Alice shook her head. "I'll drink it slow, thanks."

That afternoon she was unwell. The heat was strong again, and she had to lie down. She had no appetite for supper, having been sick twice in the afternoon; but at dusk she got up, determined to walk a little so that she could sleep the night. Emma came with another cup of tea, but she did not want it; so Emma carried it back to the kitchen, promising to heat more whenever she would like it.

She went outside once more, determined not to go near the lilac bushes.

But she could not keep away. Something drew her there. Something made her come around from the east side of the house, and step by step, she went toward the lilac bushes standing beautiful and still in the twilight.

As she came up to them, they seemed to lean toward her, and for a moment she fancied they were bending to caress her.

Then at once, even before she had entered their arbor, the

trembling and shaking of the leaves began, and the frightening whispering—the *ah-whsss* which might so easily be *A-lice, A-lice, A-lice!*

She stood it as long as she could, feeling the wind, hearing the sounds of the leaves, looking wide-eyed toward the afterglow where the leaves of the trees hung silently, unmoving in the evening's heat, dark and still on that bright turquoise and amethystine sky. Seen among the lilac leaves, the evening star winked and reappeared, as the leaves alternately concealed and revealed it.

Then she ran, trembling, back to the house, going in by the front way to her room.

In the morning she packed and came out with her luggage.

"I'm going to Boston," she said.

"Already?" asked Teresa, surprised.

"I promised Great-uncle Will. Besides, I have to be getting back. If Ben should turn up there, he'd find nobody at home."

"If your mind's made up, there's no use trying to change it," said Emma. "I'll drive you down to the station. The nine-fifteen's for Boston."

She got out of the buggy at the station with a feeling of rushing relief. "Thank you, Emma. It was real nice. If you hear word from Ben, be sure to let me know right away, will you?"

"I surely will. And you do the same."

Alice waved goodbye and boarded the train.

From her trembling lips Great-uncle Will heard all about the wind in Ben's lilacs. Great-uncle Will was a Boston lawyer with imagination. He did not neglect to take note that Alice had been nauseatingly ill that afternoon, after drinking the bitter tea Emma had prepared for her. He clucked and comforted Alice, but as soon as she had set forth on the return trip to Missouri he boarded

the first train he could get and went up to Castleton to have a talk with the proper authorities.

Even before he got there, he wondered how he could break the news to Alice that Ben Glennon had never run away, that he was buried there under the lilac bushes, filled up with arsenic or something of the kind, which those foolish women had given him, never knowing the insurance and the house were held away from them for seven years in the absence of his body. It gave him a certain grim satisfaction in the fitness of things to realize how those miserable, conniving women must have had to scrape these three years past to hold body and soul together.

Miss Esperson

I remembered Miss Esperson quite by chance, when I came upon her family name in the obituary column of a metropolitan newspaper. I suppose it is always by such obscure means that the proper bridges are made to memories, particularly those of childhood, though there is no accounting for the subsequent train of thought which may come. In Miss Esperson's case, perhaps it was the difference between a more mature outlook and that of the small boy I had been. Certainly it was not likely that there existed any relationship between the newly-deceased gentleman named Esperson and the genteel old lady of that small Louisiana town where I spent so much of my childhood.

The fact is, I had forgotten all about Miss Esperson. For two decades I had not once had occasion to remember her, and sight of the name Esperson among the obituaries was the purest happenstance, for I caught it only in passing. But thereupon immediately the image of Miss Esperson rose out of that dark well of memory, and instantly I was once more a small boy in a forgotten Louisiana town. There was Miss Esperson - tall, with a strangely rectangular face, strong jaws - almost equine, I think in retrospect - and marvellously dark eyes set off by her greying hair; and there was her little "estate", enclosed by rows of trees and a shrub-grown garden, hedged away from the rest of the town, all the way from the shaded street in front back to the river which made the rear

boundary of her land, the grounds that were such a paradise for those children who found their way there. And there was, once more, all that superstition of fear, so meaningless to a child.

For Miss Esperson, who was surely the soul of gentleness and troubled no one, going her way as serenely as might be expected of the spinsterly last of her line, was the victim of a curious conspiracy of fear on the part of the black population of the town. It was strange very largely because it seemed so unfounded. Miss Esperson had never in all her life so much as uttered a word against the Negroes; indeed, if anything she was prone to treat them with more courtesy than anyone else among the white population of that town; yet, for all that, the Negroes inevitably crossed the street at sight of her, or avoided her glance, or looked at her sideways, from the corners of their eyes. It was never anything direct, this evidence of their fear of her, always indirect. If Miss Esperson needed help at home, the Negro women to whom she made application always remembered other "jobs" they had to do that day, or they "hoped" sullenly they could come and seldom came. They hesitated to offend her outright, and when, on rare occasions, they were persuaded to appear for work, it was clear that they did so out of the fear of offending Miss Esperson; that they were invariably well treated and well paid did not seem to matter. There was something about Miss Esperson which made a direct and blunt appeal to the primitive instincts of the blacks, and their reaction to her was uniform, from the oldest of the Negroes to the youngest pickaninny. And through the pickaninnies it came to the white children, and we were given to understand vaguely that Miss Esperson was a fearful person who had certain "powers" because she had been born in the British West Indies when her father was a consul there, and she had learned many things from the superstition-ridden blacks of that country of her childhood.

The black children had a name for her, certainly gleaned from the mutterings of their parents; they called her "obioman"; this, broken down, became "obi woman", which held no meaning whatsoever for us, though we sometimes spoke of her among ourselves like that. But there was never any fear of Miss Esperson among the white children of her neighborhood; for we knew her house as a mecca, a place where we were sure to find all sorts of things which made for transports of joy—cakes and cookies, ice cream, strawberries and honey, watermelon and even games, which she played with us. Was she lonely, perhaps? She must have been, though she had her select circle of friends, and she went about paying her calls and accepting the calls of her friends, who liked her in direct proportion to the odd way in which the blacks feared her.

I remembered all this; as I have said, it rose up out of the past without change, without blemish—but there was an indefinable aura of difference, not in the facts of that memory, but in the instant interpretation; the perspective was changed. Since that last time, in my teens, when I had looked upon Miss Esperson in the dignity of death, I had not once glanced back into those early years; but here, now, strangely, out of a newspaper which was alien to her and to all the culture for which she stood, there rose up a Miss Esperson who, though precisely the same woman I had known, offered suddenly a little more, vouchsafed a revelation, as it were, to an adult both less sure of the meaning of life and death, and more sure, than that boy he had been two decades ago.

I remembered Miss Esperson, and I remembered Jamie.

Jamie lived on one side of Miss Esperson's with his father and his stepmother, just as I lived on the other, and both of us looked to Miss Esperson's house as a sort of refuge. But it was never I who needed that refuge; it was Jamie, for his stepmother was unkind and then cruel to him, and I can remember readily how

furiously, blindly angry I sometimes got in my helplessness before the knowledge of what his stepmother did to him when his father had left the house, hating him as she did, an instinct of protection rising up within me in the face of his pain and suffering. I should imagine that Jamie was about seven at this time; his mother had died two years before, and his father had married again, a striking, auburn-haired woman whose acquaintance he had made in New Orleans.

From the very first this woman had resented Jamie, perhaps initially because he persisted in clinging to his memories of his mother, which doubtless she interpreted as criticism of herself, and to which she responded not with the patience that the situation called for, but with an antagonism the boy was quick to feel; so that whatever chance there might have been for an ultimate rapprochement between the two was irrevocably lost. Moreover, she attacked him at his most vulnerable point, by seeking to deprive him of all those physical properties he owned which bore any link to his mother—the things his mother had given him, even the clothes which had been ordered or made or repaired by her, though he was in any event fast outgrowing them. Hers was a refined cruelty which was more than spiteful unkindness, and which presently degenerated into an almost beastly physical brutality, when his hatred of her showed openly and his devotion to his mother's memory would not be in any way lessened.

Whenever he could escape her, he fled to my home or to Miss Esperson, who had known his mother and was therefore another link to that dear past so free of cruelty and pain. And to us, as to no one else—not even to his father, for he had learned how his stepmother could twist his complaints into triumphs for her—he told everything that had happened, not with any eagerness, rather with a reluctance born of the dire necessity of lessening somehow the burden of his suffering by sharing it. And Miss Esperson in

her gentle way would comfort him, drawing him out very skillfully.

"Nothing is ever as bad as you think it is," she would say.

"She wouldn't let me have anything to eat for breakfast except some spoiled milk," he would confess.

Always *She*; he would never call her anything else. Even a whip would not have driven him to call her by any word which might suggest a maternal relationship.

"Then you shall have what you like here."

And, while he ate the food she put out for him, he went on with a recital of his woes. He was not a complaining child. That is to say, there was nothing whining or pathetic about him, though he looked soft, with his great, mellow eyes, and a pale skin through which the veins showed a shadowy blue. No, he merely recited the tale of his hardships in a flat, monotonous voice with a note of dubiety in it, as if he felt that what he had to say was far too incredible to be believed even by people like us, whom he trusted.

Towards the end—for there was an end to Jamie's misery, though we did not foresee it then—he was persuaded from time to time to show Miss Esperson the welts he bore on his thin back, and, remembering her now from this vantage point, I can see quite clearly in my mind's eye the way in which initially she winced, and then the way in which her face seemed to pale and set, and a kind of hardness which shone in her eyes.

"Oh, you poor boy!" she would exclaim, and trot him off into the house where she laved his bruised back and salved it, and from which she brought him out again with perhaps something special to take his mind from his woes—chocolates or a kind of honey-cake she made now and then.

But Jamie's mind was never very far from his troubles, for all that he did not complain. You saw it in his eyes, whenever he

looked toward the house where he lived, though little of that was to be seen for the trees and the hedge. His house, like mine and Miss Esperson's, had a beautiful back yard sweeping to the river, though there was less shrubbery and garden now that his mother had died, his stepmother finding little enough time to care for herself to spend any on the grounds either in person or in giving directions to the gardeners who were always to be recruited from among the black population. You knew, too, that he had long since been forbidden to visit Miss Esperson; doubtless his stepmother suspected that he had Miss Esperson's sympathy, for on one occasion even before she had begun to beat Jamie, she marched over into Miss Esperson's yard, took hold of Jamie, and literally dragged him home—though not before she had told Miss Esperson what she thought of her, which was neither kind nor pleasant—leaving Miss Esperson standing all a-tremble, with her lace handkerchief pressed to her lips, and her astonished eyes following the pair retreating among the trees, and Jamie's screams of angry protest rising and falling—and the sound, too, of Mrs. Fallon's blows falling upon the boy.

I said then what I had heard my mother say. "Mrs. Fallon's not a lady, is she, Miss Esperson?"

"I'm afraid not, Stephen," she said. "She doesn't act the way a lady should act, does she?"

But Jamie came all the same. He desperately needed the refuge Miss Esperson offered him. He needed it more than he feared the punishment he knew would be given him when his stepmother discovered where he had gone; so his seeking this place was a course forced upon him by something more vital than the normal revulsion he experienced at the certain knowledge of the punishment, corporal or otherwise, he inevitably incurred.

My mother always spoke of Mr. Fallon as a "fatuous man." Though no one knew what tales his second wife told him, cer-

tainly he should have known what was going on. Perhaps the second Mrs. Fallen went through a well-planned show of appealing for Jamie's affection whenever Mr. Fallon was at home, knowing she could count on being spurned proudly and angrily, as she naturally would have been after having abused Jamie all day long. Surely there were many devious ways in which she could have deceived her husband, many opportunities for concealing the truth of the matter and of subtly prejudicing him against his own son. Mr. Fallon was, in any case, "a fool about women," as my father put it.

I suppose the torture of Jamie went on for about a year. Now, twenty years later, I could not be sure; certain aspects of memory are perfect enough, but the consideration of time as a dimension alters with the years. Certainly it was a long time; it may have been more than a year, because it was apparent that Jamie's health had become affected finally, and it was manifest that his stepmother meant to rid herself of him by any means short of outright murder. And perhaps she might not have stopped even at that, if she believed that she could escape its consequences, though it was easy for a boy to become prejudiced against her, knowing of Jamie's misery, and an emotional small boy may not be the best of evidence.

One day Jamie had a tale to tell—a warm day following an unseasonably cold night. He had caught a bad cold. How had he come by it? asked Miss Esperson kindly, concerned about his hacking cough.

"I didn't have enough covers," he said.

"Oh, but you just had to unroll the patch-quilt, Jamie," said Miss Esperson, knowing that he slept with a little quilt rolled up at the foot of his bed—as so many of us did; so that, if the night grew cold, we could simply reach down and unroll it for the additional warmth it offered.

"She took it."

For a moment or two Miss Esperson did not know what to say; a kind of conflict showed in her face, a certain wonder. "When?" she asked at last.

"When she came in to open the windows."

The night had been too chill for open windows—much too chill.

"Were you asleep?" asked Miss Esperson gently.

"She thought I was."

What was not apparent to an eight-year-old like myself at that time must certainly have been evident to Miss Esperson. If Jamie's stepmother had come into his room while he slept to remove the quilt at the same time she opened the windows, then she must have meant him to catch cold—or worse. Worse, probably. To that degree, at least, he had thwarted her, and Miss Esperson helped by taking him into the house and rubbing his chest with goose-grease, and giving him something hot to drink, something she made out of what she took from some strange little cloth bags high up in one of her cupboards, something smelling very wonderful to a boy, spicy and sweet—herbs, doubtless, for she had been known to gather them on the edge of town along the river where the swamps were—and where the Negroes lived, too, many of them, who, seeing her there, retreated to their cabins and closed doors and windows tight against the nebulous anticipations born of their irrational fears.

So Jamie's cold went away.

But the distress Miss Esperson felt was not so readily put down. And there was, too, an always evident apprehension, as if she could never be sure that some day Jamie would not come secretly through the hedge, as if he might never come to this haven again, as if she might fail him, or rather, she and I, for she had a faculty of making me feel that in this protection of Jamie we were at

one. And so, I suppose, we were, for if ire and hatred could have slain Mrs. Fallon, I could have accomplished it with ease. I remember quite often weeping with helpless rage, weeping at the knowledge that I could do nothing to protect Jamie from his stepmother's viciousness. So it was distress and apprehension that we shared—not alone sweet-cakes and honey, not alone the little games we played.

On another day, Jamie crawled through the hedge violently ill. He was not able to walk upright. Miss Esperson saw him from her drawing-room and ran out to him; she carried him into her own bedroom and there he still lay when I came from my home later, still wretchedly ill, though Miss Esperson had given him something, and, when I came in, she was walking back and forth, white as one of the daisies in the vase at the window, and the moment she saw me, she poured some of Jamie's vomit from the dish beside the bed into a fruit jar, and sent me with that and a little note to Dr. Lefevre, who was old and retired, and belonged, like Miss Esperson, to the old families of Louisiana.

Afterward, when he felt somewhat better, Miss Esperson questioned him. What had he eaten?

Nothing but breakfast.

And that was what?

"Milk and toast. It tasted funny."

He had grown steadily more ill, and by noon he had begun to vomit. His stepmother had shut him up in the bathroom, literally. There she had left him. He had crawled out of the window in mortal terror, weak as he was. Doubtless Miss Esperson felt that his instinct was right.

After that she put on her bonnet, took her umbrella, and started out of the house.

But she did not, after all, call on either Mrs. Fallon or Jamie's father. That she meant to do so was evident, for she walked di-

rectly over toward the Fallon house. But she turned at the hedge and came back to where I sat watching over Jamie at her instruction. She came back and without a word she took off her bonnet and put her umbrella away.

Jamie was terribly weak still, but feeling better.

I remember how she looked, coming back into that room. Her eyes were very strange; if I had not known her so well, she might have frightened me. She sat down beside Jamie and took one of his hands between hers, and she talked to him. She talked to him very strangely—not the way she was accustomed to talk, though she was as gentle as always.

"Jamie, your stepmother has beautiful hair," she said.

"I don't like red hair."

"And when she combs it, some of it comes out."

"I wish it would all fall out. I wish I could tear it out."

"Jamie, does your stepmother keep her hair?"

"Yes."

"Will you bring some of it to me?"

"Yes."

Then she smiled, and he smiled, and something went out of the air in that room. It was queer though at that time perhaps it did not seem more than just a little unusual; children accept many things adults will not accept, since the world of a child is a constant revelation without any need for knowledge of cause and effect. Of course, Mrs. Fallon, like most of the white women of that town—and doubtless of all small towns in the country in those years—kept her combed-out hair to use later on in padding out her coiffures. What instinct Jamie possessed, I could not know, of course; certainly he must have imagined that he was entering into a conspiracy with Miss Esperson; undoubtedly he felt that his stepmother would not want him to take any of her combed-out hair, and this knowledge lent determination to his promise.

So one day he came with a fistful of hair and gave it to Miss Esperson, who held it up to the sun and said, "Oh, see how it shines red in the sun!" and, "And wouldn't she be angry if she knew you had given some of it to me!" at which we all laughed together, intoxicated by this secret. "But you didn't take all of it—you didn't empty it of hair?"

"Oh, no, Miss Esperson."

"Yes, then she would have known—this way, she will be annoyed and wonder," she said, and put the auburn hairs into her pocket.

Never a word after that about Mrs. Fallon's hair. But there was no lessening of interest in and apprehension about Jamie. He had been cautioned about his food; he must not eat anything at all which tasted funny, and if he did—or if he were forced to eat something he did not think he should eat, for Miss Esperson considered this possibility, too—he must take some of the little pills Dr. Lefevre had sent up to make him vomit anything bad from his stomach.

It was perhaps a fortnight or so after that that we began to play a new game under Miss Esperson's guidance. We were going to play at making a "pond" for her goldfish, and Miss Esperson laid out a little plan we were to follow. There would be, first of all, the hole in the lawn for the pool itself, with a few stones here and there, and sand. Then there would be the pipe which came from the house and brought the running water to the pool; and then the runway for the overflow water to escape to the river at the foot of Miss Esperson's lawn. In addition to all this, there would be a kind of miniature landscaping, to make the pond look like a big lake or a pool in a river, since the water flowed in and out.

Day after day we worked at it, and from time to time Miss Esperson would give advice; or she would change this or that, until

the pond was finished, and the water filled in, and running out. Across the "pond" was a dwarf woods—just like that which rose across the river from Miss Esperson's garden; and on this side gardens sloped down, with a hedge separating them right in the middle of the pond's bank. But Miss Esperson did not bring down the goldfish, though each day she changed this or that about the pond, so that we never had time to wonder about the goldfish, and we guessed that probably she was afraid passing cats might paw them out and devour them. It did not matter about the goldfish, in any case; the pond was something new, and the three of us talked of more play of this kind—talked of building a full-sized brook, with dams and waterfalls, to which Miss Esperson said, yes, it could be done, perhaps we would do it, but not now—not yet.

On Thursdays every week Jamie took a music lesson. He would not have been permitted to take it if his stepmother had thought he enjoyed music; but he pretended to hate it; so she forced him to go, convinced that she was but adding to the discomfort of his small life. And usually I went along. But that Thursday was hot, and Miss Quentin's house, where Jamie went, was old and musty and damp, and in that hot afternoon waiting there and listening to Jamie would be very uncomfortable; it was too hot even to go outside and play on the corner lot with George Washington Osmond and the rest of the pickaninnies; so I did not go; I slept as long as I could in the heat, and then I got up, meaning to go to Miss Esperson's.

But she would not expect me, of course, since I customarily went with Jamie.

I walked over to the window of my room, which was on the second floor. Downstairs my mother was doing something with the dishes and talking to Libby, the black cook; out in the back swing my little sister, who had got up before me, was playing house with her dolls; the black boys and girls were screaming

and hollering in the corner lot; the heat never bothered them. And over in her back yard, over beyond the hedge, Miss Esperson was playing at her pond. Perhaps she had brought the goldfish out at last.

I wanted to run right over.

But there was something about Miss Esperson's movements that prevented me, something about her attitude that was alien. She was on her knees, which was strange for Miss Esperson, who usually stood and gave directions or bent and changed things. And she was kneeling very straight and tall, except once in a while when she bent over; and all the time she made odd, jerky movements, as if she were imitating something mechanical. She seemed to be talking to herself, and it looked, after I had watched her for a while, as if she had something on the ground in front of her and pushed it from time to time toward the pond. I knelt at the window and looked out through the lace curtains, and I began to have a strange feeling, the way I felt when I saw a cat playing with a mouse, letting it go and then pawing it again just when the mouse thought it had got away, letting it go again, and catching it—over and over. It was horrible. I remember that horrible feeling even today, chiefly because it was so meaningless at that time.

But it was coming close to the time when Jamie would come home, and I knew he would come either here or to Miss Esperson, wondering where I had been. I got up and left the window. The moment I was out of sight of Miss Esperson, that horrible feeling was gone.

I went outside. Oh, it was hot that day! It was too hot even to tease Clara; so I went past. "There goes your Uncle Stephen, Children," said Clara to her dolls. It was too hot even for the dog to wag his tail; he lay in a shady spot and looked at me out of one drowsy eye.

I went through the hedge.

Miss Esperson was still kneeling there. I thought I would surprise her; perhaps I would scare her; it would be fun to see her jump.

I walked without a sound across the lawn, slipping from one bush to another. As I came closer to her, I could hear her voice. It sounded different. It sounded hoarse and throaty; it sounded like the way Libby sounded when she talked to herself while at work in the kitchen; or the way old Mose, who worked at the livery stable, talked to the horses—kind of low and intimate, but rough, guttural, muttered-like, a strange, queer way for Miss Esperson to talk. It made me feel odd, too, but not scared, though the language she spoke was not English; it was a kind of animal-like gibberish, and to hear it from Miss Esperson's lips was like hearing a holy person cursing and talking obscenities.

I walked up behind her and she heard me. Quick as a flash her hand came down to cover something there, and I saw her long index finger push something down under the water—for it had been lying there in the sunlight in the shallow water at the edge of the pond. But not before I saw it—a tiny little doll, dressed all in white, with a head of auburn hair—like Mrs. Fallon's.

"Oh," cried Miss Esperson in mock fright, "how you scared me! You're a rascal, Steve!"

"I'm not either," I said.

And at that moment Jamie came running through the hedge from the other side, crying out to me, "Where were you today?"

"It was too hot," I said.

"Does your mother know you came without changing your clothes?" asked Miss Esperson severely.

"No. She's not home," answered Jamie. "What have you been doing?" he asked, looking at the pond accusingly. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just came."

Miss Esperson smiled. "Don't be selfish, Jamie. Today we're going to start making the brook, just as I promised."

She reached down and began to obliterate the landscape nearest her. The imitation trees, the hedge on her right, which was toward Jamie's house, the place where she had pushed the doll down out of sight, into the water and perhaps the sand and mud beneath—in moments, all were gone. She reached across the pond, and down went the woods there. She raised the far end of the pond a little and a waterfall sprang into being. By that time we were both on our knees at her side, impatiently waiting for her directions. They came, calculatingly.

"Jamie will take the sand-shovel and make the bed of the brook to the river," she said. "And you, Stephen—you will dam up the water so that it cannot flow out. Let's just imagine that my gold-fish are here, after all—we couldn't let them get away, could we?"

She laughed and we laughed and we began to play.

That was the way I remembered her well into my teens—a strange woman in many ways. But now I ask myself often—was there indeed something in that odd little pond she did not want to get away? And I remember that, after all, the landscape on the side of the pool nearest Miss Esperson's house was very much like the landscape there in reality—with the hedge and all, and that the doll which I never saw again had been pushed down into the water on what would have been Fallon's side of that hedge. I suppose that would never have occurred to me as a child; I suppose only an adult mind could be so devious.

That evening my father came home late, and he looked very grave.

My mother noticed it at once. "John—something's happened!" she cried.

"Haven't you heard?"

"No. What is it?"

"It's Mrs. Fallon. She drowned herself in the river this afternoon."

"Oh, how horrible!"

"We've just now found the body. It was down quite deep, with something holding it—roots or a stone or something. God knows why she should have wanted to take her own life—but she did."

I remember how glad I was for Jamie; I remember how happy he was, too, though he tried not to show it to anyone but Miss Esperson and me. But now, looking back, I remember what the blacks called Miss Esperson; I remember that strange, red-haired doll; and I recognize the quality of Miss Esperson's marvellously dark eyes—the deep, unfathomable inscrutability which hid something more than children were meant to see.

The Night Train to Lost Valley

Something about city lights in the dusk takes me back to the old days when I was "on the road." A traveling salesman for harnesses and leather goods—"drummers", we were called then—certainly prosaic enough just past the turn of the century. A curious thing, too, for lights were not too much a part of that hill-country route in New Hampshire. Brighton to Hempfield to Dark Rock to Gale's Corners—and at last to Lost Valley, on a little country train running out of Brighton on the spur to Lost Valley and back, the train I had to take to make Lost Valley and work back down to Brighton. And unique it was, surely, in more ways than one—old-fashioned locomotive, coal car, and seldom more than one coach with a baggage car.

I took the night train because there was no other. It went up in the evening out of Brighton, and it came back next morning. Strange, rugged country. Strange people, too—uncommonly dark, and in many ways primitive—not backward, exactly, I would never have called them that, but given to certain old ways not frequently encountered even in the first decade of the century, when vestiges of the 1890's still lingered in widely scattered areas of the country. But beautiful country, for all its strangeness: that could not be gainsaid. Dark, brooding country, much wooded, with startling vistas opening up before one's eyes on the morning trip down out of Lost Valley.

I used to wonder why the spur had been run to Lost Valley, unless the town had given greater promise when the railroad was put through—a promise clearly never fulfilled, for it was small, its houses clustered close together, with many trees, even in its main street—trees of great size, so that it was apparent that board walks had been built around them. The dusty roads too wound in and out among the trees. But, being in the heart of agricultural country, however sparsely settled, it supported a large harness shop, so that it was important to get into Lost Valley for the seasonal order.

The train used to wait on a siding in Brighton, steam up, ready to pull away. Sometimes, when people went down to Concord for an inauguration or for just a shopping trip, the single coach had to expand to two, and both were filled; but usually there were few people to make the trip all the way up to Lost Valley—about seventy miles or thereabouts, and quite often, considering the relatively few times I made the trip, I was the only passenger—sharing the train with the conductor, the brakeman, the engineer and a fireman, with all of whom I grew quite friendly in the course of time, since the train's personnel did not change much in a decade.

The conductor, Jem Watkins, was an old fellow, lean and a little bent, with a sharp, wry humor which fitted in somehow with his small bright eyes and his thin goatee. I knew him better than the others, for often on the twenty-odd miles between Gale's Corners and Lost Valley, he came in and sat to talk. The brakeman did this too, on those occasions when I was the sole passenger. A tall, saturnine individual named Toby Colter, he never had much to say, but he could become enthusiastic about the weather, and he seemed to have an inexhaustible store of anecdotes concerning the weather in the vicinity of Lost Valley. Abner Pringle, the engineer, and Sib Whately, the fireman, I knew less well. I had a hailing knowledge of them, so to speak, and

little more, but they were always friendly. They were all four hill-country men, all, in fact, from Lost Valley or its vicinity, and they were filled with the lore of that country.

Strange lore—strange with the strangeness of alliance to old things, to old customs long since forgotten. To what extent they were forgotten in Lost Valley I have since had more than one occasion to wonder, though there is not much doubt but that I would never have thought of any kinship at all between the town and the old customs if it had not been for my last trip to Lost Valley. It is always of that last trip and what happened that night that I come to think, finally, perplexed, unsure, and filled with a kind of amazed wonder still. Everything else—the trip up and back, the long talks with Jem Watkins and Toby Colter, the people of the town, the big orders placed in Lost Valley, even to a large extent the wild beauty of the scenery—ultimately falls into the general pattern of reminiscence, but not the last trip to Lost Valley.

Yet, vivid as it is, there is always an element of doubt. Did it, after all, really happen? Or was it a dream? For it had the quality of a dream, beyond question, and it had the hazy after-effect of a dream. Things sometimes happen to a man which are so far out of the ordinary that he tends inevitably to discredit his senses. Conversely, dreams of such realism sometimes take place that a man deliberately seeks some supporting evidence to convince himself of their reality. Dream or reality, it does not matter. Something happened that night in Lost Valley, something of which the train and the men on it and I myself were an integral part, something which left in memory an abiding wonder and a chaotic confusion, and which might have had a meaning of which I have never cared—or dared—to think.

I knew it was to be my last trip, since I was going into office work; so that the event was in itself unusual. And then, too, the

train—for once in the decade I had taken it—set out ahead of time. It was unprecedented, and if I had not been at the station in Brighton fully half an hour early, I would have missed the train and would have had to go to Lost Valley on the following day. I have often wondered whether what happened to me that night, would have taken place the following night.

The early starting of the train was only the beginning of the curious events of that night. For one thing, when I waved at Abner Pringle, on my way past the locomotive to the single coach, I was startled to see an expression of almost ludicrous consternation upon his usually placid features, and he returned my wave with half-hearted reluctance. His reaction was so unexpected that before I had gone ten steps, I was convinced that I had imagined it. But I had not, for at sight of me, Jem Watkins likewise looked by turns unpleasantly surprised and dismayed.

"Mr. Wilson," he said in an uncertain voice.

"You don't look glad to see me, and that's a fact, Jem," I said.

"You're makin' the trip—tonight?"

I had climbed into the coach by this time, Jem Watkins after me, with his conductor's cap in one hand and the other scratching his head.

"I'm late this year, I know it," I said. "But I'm making the trip." I looked at him, and he at me; I could not get away from the conviction that I was the last person Jem Watkins expected or wanted to see. "But if you don't want to take me, Jem, why, say so."

Jem swallowed; the adam's apple of that scrawny neck moved up and down. "Couldn't you go up tomorrow?"

"Tonight," I said. "I'll tell you something. It's my last trip."

"Your last trip?" he echoed in a weak voice. "You mean—you're stayin' with us up there?"

"Well, no, not exactly. I've been transferred to the office. You'll

have a new man hereafter, and I hope you'll treat him as nice as you always treated me."

Strangely, it seemed that the conductor was slightly mollified at the news that this was to be my last trip; I had thought, perhaps in some vanity, that he might regret it. Yet he was not wholly pleased, and perhaps nothing would have pleased him but that I descend and leave him and his train go along up to Lost Valley without me. Perhaps in other circumstances I might have done so, despite my feeling at a loss to account for my reception; but now, with promotion just ahead, I did not want to waste a minute in getting over with my last tasks as a salesman. So I settled myself, and tried to appear unconcerned about the curious way in which Jem Watkins stood there in the aisle of the coach, turning his hat in his hands, this way and that, and not knowing just what to say.

"The people up there are pretty busy this time of the year," he said finally. "I don't know whether it wouldn't be best to send in by mail for your order from Mr. Darby."

"And miss saying goodbye to him?" I said. "Mr. Darby wouldn't like that."

Jem Watkins retreated, baffled, after a hurried look at his watch, and in a few moments the train pulled out of the station, just four minutes short of half an hour ahead of time. Since I was the only passenger, I knew Jem would be back; we had hardly gone two miles beyond Brighton, when he came walking into the car, and Toby Colter was with him, both of them looking uneasy and grim.

"We talked it over," said Jem slowly, while Toby nodded portentously, "and we kind of figured you might like to stay in Gale's Corners tonight and come in to Lost Valley in the morning."

I laughed at this; it seemed so ingenuous. "Come now, Jem, it's to Lost Valley I'm going, and no other place. Gale's Corners in

the morning, remember? We've done it twice a year for ten years, and you've never thought of changing before."

"But this year you're late, Mr. Wilson," said Toby.

"That I am. And if I don't hurry now, I won't be back in Boston by the second. Let me see, it's April thirtieth today, and I've got to run into Gainesville before I head back to Boston. I can just make it."

"You won't see Mr. Darby tonight," said Jem.

"Why not?"

"Because he won't be there, that's why."

"Well, then, I'll see him in the morning." But I thought with regret that I would not be sitting around that old-fashioned stove in the harness-shop spending the evening in the kind of trivial talk which is the very stuff of life in country places.

Jem took my ticket and punched it, and Toby, after a baffled glance at me, left the car. Jem seemed resigned now. He sat looking out to the fleeting landscape; the last of the sun was drawing off the land, and out of the east, in the pockets among the hills, a blue and purple haze that was twilight was gathering. We were perhaps ten miles out of Brighton and already drawing near to Hempfield. And by that time I was filled with the strangeness of this ride—with everything about it, from the unexpected early start to the conductor's incredible attitude.

The country through which we were traveling was one of increasing wildness, and at this hour especially beautiful, for the last sunlight still tipped the hill-tops, and the darkness of dusk welled up from the valleys, while the sky overhead was a soft blue of unparalleled clarity, against which the few small cirrus clouds were a startling white. It was that hour of the day during which the face of heaven and of earth changed with singular rapidity, so that in a few moments the clouds which had been white, were peach, and in a few more, crimson on the under side and old rose

on top, and soon lavender, while the blue of the sky became dark overhead, and changed to aquamarine and amethyst above the lemon and turquoise of the afterglow. The train moved into the west, and I watched the ever-changing world outside the coach with a pleasure all the deeper and more appreciative for the knowledge that perhaps I would never again be viewing this particular scene.

The route to Lost Valley went steadily into hill country, and up to just beyond Gale's Corners by four miles or thereabouts, the railroad was an almost imperceptible up-grade; then, sixteen miles or so this side of Lost Valley, the down-grade began, though it was not the equivalent of the previous up-grade, so that clearly Lost Valley lay in a little pocket of the higher hills beyond Gale's Corners. We stopped briefly at Hempfield, apparently for the debouching of mail, and went on again without further interruption. I had made an effort to look out of the window to notice whether the station-agent at Hempfield was at all surprised at the train's early arrival, but if he was, he did not show it. The conductor had leaned out of the window and passed the time of the evening with him, opining that it would be a clear night, and then again resumed his seat opposite me, from which he glanced at me with a kind of helpless dubiousness from time to time.

His unnatural uncommunicativeness troubled me eventually. "Jem," I said, "how has old Mrs. Perkins been? She was quite sick last time I was up."

"Oh, she's dead, Mr. Wilson," said Jem, nodding his head lugubriously. "Died in February."

"Too bad. And how's that crippled baby of Beales'?"

"Poorly, Mr. Wilson, poorly." He gave me a curious look just then, a very curious look, and for a moment I had the idea that he was about to say something; but evidently he thought better of it, for he did not speak, except to say, "Poorly," again.

"I'm sorry not to see Mr. Darby tonight," I went on. "I enjoy sitting around that stove with the old-timers who come in."

Jem said nothing.

"What would he be doing tonight?"

"Why, round about this time he finishes his winter work, as you'd ought to know, Mr. Wilson, and he's pretty busy tottin' up his books and gettin' things in order."

"That's so," I said, "but I've seen him at that earlier in April than this, and he never closed up shop for it then."

"Mr. Darby's gittin' old," said Jem, with unexpected vehemence.

Those were his last words until we were past Gale's Corners, and then he spoke only in answer to my perplexed comment that none of the station-agents along the route had shown any surprise at the train's being almost three-quarters of an hour early, for it had accelerated its speed considerably since leaving Brighton.

"We're usually ahead of time this time of year," said Jem. And once more there was that curious, baffled glance—as if he thought I knew something I was not telling, and wished that I would say it, and clear the air.

Soon then we came into sight of Lost Valley—or what, in the gathering darkness, I knew to be Lost Valley: a cluster of lights, not many, for there were not more than thirty buildings in the hamlet, and it existed not so much because of the people who lived within its limits as it did because of those people back in the hills who did their trading there. Then we drew up at the station, and there was old Henry Pursley bent over the telegraph key with the yellow light of his lamp-lit room streaming out to the station platform: a cozy scene, and one of pleasant warmth.

But I had no sooner stepped down from the train into the light than he looked up and saw me; and instead of the customary greeting I expected, his jaw dropped, and he sat staring at me,

and then, accusingly, it seemed, at Jem. Only then did he greet me, soberly, and, coming out, spoke in a low voice to Jem, which sounded as if he were berating Jem for forgetting something.

I went up along the street away from the station, and, seeing that Darby's Harness Shop was indeed dark, I crossed over to the one two-storey house in town, that of the widowed Mrs. Emerson and her daughter, Angeline, where I was accustomed to staying. And there, too, I was greeted with the same consternation and surprise, and for a moment it seemed that for once the door of the house would be closed against me, but then Angeline, a tall, dark girl, with black eyes and a flame-like mark under one ear, opened the door and invited me in.

"You're late this Spring, Mr. Wilson," she said.

I admitted it. "But it's my last trip," I explained, and told them why.

Mrs. Emerson looked at me shrewdly. "You've not eaten, Mr. Wilson. You look dissatisfied."

I felt dissatisfied and would have gone on to tell them why, if it were not that I felt they, too, would say nothing to me, for, after all, I was an outsider, and in all small towns, even in less secluded places, a man from "outside" does not gain the confidence of villagers for years, sometimes as many as twenty or more. I admitted that I had not eaten.

"Then you'll have to eat, Mr. Wilson."

"I wouldn't think of troubling you, thank you, Mrs. Emerson."

Mrs. Emerson, however, would hear of nothing but that Angeline must at once prepare food, and she herself brought me a bitter-tasting tea which, she said, she had brewed of bergamotte and mint; and it did have a minty aroma, though it tasted more bitter than minty, and I took the opportunity, when the women were both out of the sitting-room for a moment, of pouring the brew into a pot containing a large fern, prayerfully hoping that

no harm would come to the fern. I had drunk enough, in any case, to leave an unpleasant taste in my mouth, about which I complained to Mrs. Emerson as soon as she appeared, whereupon she immediately produced a piece of old-fashioned sweet chocolate.

"I thought might be you wouldn't care for it too much, but it's good for you just the same. But this'll take the taste of it away."

So it did. And the meal itself, which was a good and ample one, did more—it made me realize that, what with all the rushing about of the day in Brighton and on the way there, I was tired. The hour was nine o'clock, and, while it was by no means late, it was to bed I wanted to go. Thereupon, with all the customary show of hospitality I had come to expect of my hostesses in the years past, I was shown to my room.

Once abed, I fell asleep with unusual alacrity.

From that point on, I cannot be sure that what happened was reality. It may have been dream. But there were subsequently certain disquieting factors, which, pieced together, pointed to conclusions wholly outside my small world—though I had never before realized how small that world was. What happened may have been a powerful, transcendent dream. It may not.

It began with my waking. I woke suddenly with a headache and the taste of Mrs. Emerson's bitter tea strong and hot in my mouth. Intending to go for water, I got up, put on my trousers, shoes, and shirt, and went downstairs, feeling my way in the dark. Before I reached the bottom of the stairs, I was aware of a commotion outside the house, and, pausing to look out, I saw an extraordinary movement of people in the direction of the railroad station, and then, peering up the street, I saw that the train—the night train to Lost Valley on which I had come—was standing, steam up, at the station. But, most strange of all, the people I saw were

clad in conical hats and black cloaks; some of them carried torches, and some did not.

I turned and struck a match, and by its light I saw that a trunk under the stair had been thrown open, clothing taken out, and everything left as it was, as if someone had been in great haste to get away. Among the pieces there was a black cloak, and a conical hat, which I divined to be the property of the late Mr. Emerson. I stood for a moment looking down at them; then the match went out.

What was it out there in the streets? Where were all these people going? Men, women, and children—it seemed as if the entire population of Lost Valley was deserting the town.

I reached down in the dark and touched the black cloak. I lifted it and set it on my shoulders, drawing it tight around my neck; it swathed me from neck to toe. I took up the conical hat and put it on, and saw that it provided a kind of masking fold for the face as well.

Then, acting on an extraordinary impulse, I opened the door and went out to join the thronging people.

All were going to the train, and all were boarding the train. But the train was headed away from the only direction it could take out of Lost Valley, and it stood not quite at the station, but a little beyond it, and beyond the turntable where it customarily turned around to make the morning trip down to Brighton. The coach was not lit, but the light from the fire-box and the glare of a half dozen torches held by men mounted on the locomotive made a weird illumination in a night dark save for the locomotive's headlight pointed to the woods ahead. And, looking in that direction, I was startled to see what must have been newly-laid, but not new tracks, leading away into the dark hills beyond Lost Valley.

So much I saw before mounting into the unlit coach, which

was crowded with silent people. Then nothing more. No light flared in the crowded coach. No one spoke. The silence was unbelievable, no word sounded, no human voice was heard save once the cry of a baby I could not see. Nor was the coach alone filled; so was the baggage car, and so, too, was the coal car. People clung to the train, from the locomotive to the rear platform—a great, silent throng, the entire population of Lost Valley, bent on a mission in the dead of night, for the hour surely approached midnight, judging by the stars overhead, and the position of the gibbous moon which hung yellow low in the eastern sky. There was an extraordinary feeling of excitement, of tension, and of wonder in the coach, and I too began to feel it in the increased beating of my pulse, and in a kind of apprehensive exhilaration caught from my hooded and cloaked companions.

Without bell or whistle-sound, the train set out, drawing away from the deserted village into the dark hills. I tried to estimate how far we went—I thought not farther than seven miles. But we passed under arched trees of great age, through glens and narrow valleys, past murmurous brooks, past mourning whippoorwills and owls, into a veritable kingdom of night, before the train slowed to a stop, and at once everyone aboard began to get out, still wordless and tense. But this time the torch-bearers took the lead, and certain others pushed up to be right behind them, while others waited patiently to fall into line, and I myself, fearful lest some regular order be imposed upon the throng, waited until last, and then fell into step beside another hooded man, who, I felt sure, could be none other than Abner Pringle, for only he had such girth and height.

They did not go far, but, coming suddenly to an open space, the torch-bearers alone went forward and ranged themselves below a strange stone image—or was it an image? The light flickered so and danced upon the stone there in the wood, I could not be

sure; yet it seemed to be an image, and presently all who had gone before me were prostrate on the ground before the stone, and there remained, myself among them, until those who had walked directly behind the torch-bearers rose and began a slow, rhythmic dancing, while another of them walked directly to the foot of the stone and began to chant in a voice I felt sure was Mr. Darby's. Latin, by the sound of it—but not pure Latin, for mixed with it was a gibberish I could not understand. Nor could I hear enough of the Latin to know what it was that was being said. A calling upon God, certainly. But what God? No Christian God in this place, for no Christian hand had touched that curious stone and the alter-like approach to it. In indeed it were an altar. Some hand had cut away the trees there, and some one had kept the grass down in that place. And there was something about the "fruits of the earth" and something more about "Ahriman" and something about the "Gift" (or "gifts") to come.

Then suddenly, a blue flame shone before the stone, and at sight of it the prostrate ones rose to their feet and began a wild dance to music coming from somewhere—a piping of fluted notes, which burst forth into the dark night like the startled voices of the forest's habitants themselves—music which grew wilder and wilder, as the dancers did, also—and I, too, for I was seized by a compulsion I could not struggle against, and I danced among them, sometimes alone, sometimes with someone—once, I am sure, with Angeline, in a wild, sensuous rout. The music mounted to a powerful crescendo, and on every side people screamed and chanted strange unintelligible words, and the dancing became more and more abandoned, until, as abruptly as it had begun, the music stopped.

At that instant, the celebrant before the stone stepped forward, bent and took up something there, tore away its covering, raised

it high, whirling it thrice around his head, and dashed it to the stone, where its cry was stilled. What was it? What manner of creature had been sacrificed there? It seemed unfurred, unfeathered, too. White and unclothed. *A baby?*

A great sigh rose up. Then silence. The blue flame at the stone flickered, turned to green, to red, and began to subside.

The torch-bearers started to file away from the stone, and the hooded celebrants waited to fall in line after them, though the master of the ceremony had been joined by two others, and all three were now bent about the base of the stone, while the others made their silent way back to the waiting train.

There we waited, again in unbroken silence, until all were once more on board, clinging to all sides of the train, filling every space. Then the train started up again, backing down to Lost Valley from which it had come away an hour or more before. How long I could not say. Time seemed to have no meaning in this eldritch night, but the moon was far higher than it had been. Two hours perhaps. Though it seemed incredible that we had been away so long.

I had wisely taken my place near to the door of the coach, so that I could make my escape quickly, get back to the house, remove my cloak and hood, and be in my room before Mrs. Emerson and Angeline returned. So I slipped away from the train and lost myself in the shadows. When the door opened and closed for the two women, I was once again in bed.

But had I ever left that bed?

I woke up tired, true. But I woke up to Lost Valley as I had always known it. When had my dream begun?

At the breakfast table, Mrs. Emerson asked whether the tea had agreed with me.

I told her it had not.

"Nor with me, either. It gave me a headache," she said. "And such a taste!"

"Well, nobody caught *me* drinking it," said Angeline.

I went over to the harness shop, and there was August Darby, just as hale and hearty as ever, just as friendly. A jovial fellow, fat-cheeked, Teutonic in his looks, with a full moustache and merry eyes.

"Heard you were in town last night. Man, why didn't you come to the house? I was there. Worked on my books till one o'clock," he said. His smile was fresh, guileless, innocent. "But today—I'm tired. I'm getting old."

He had a large order for me, and he made it larger before I left, after he found out he might not see me again.

I made a point of walking in the vicinity of the railroad station.

There were no tracks leading to the woods beyond the town. Nothing. There was no sign that any tracks had ever been there. The train was turned and waiting, and, seeing me go by, Jem Watkins called out, "Hey there, Mr. Wilson—you nearly ready?"

"Just about," I said.

I turned and went back into the village and stopped at Beales' house. I knocked on the door and Mrs. Beale came to answer, with her husband standing not far behind. Strange! He looked as if he had been crying. Red-eyes, bitter-mouthed. He stood a moment, and then was gone, backing away somewhere out of my sight.

"Hello, Mrs. Beale. How's the baby?"

She looked at me with a most extraordinary expression in her eyes. She glanced down, and I did, too. She was carrying folded baby clothes.

"Not well," she said. "Not well at all, Mr. Wilson. I'm afraid it won't be long."

"May I see her?"

She looked at me for a long moment. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Wilson. She's sleeping. It's been a hard time getting her to sleep."

"I'm sorry," I said.

I bade her goodbye and stepped away. But not before I had seen what she had been about when I knocked. Folding and wrapping baby clothes, a lot of them, and putting them away—not in a bureau—but in a trunk there in the front room.

I went over to the station and got into the train. From the window I took a last look at Lost Valley. When you come into a town as most drummers do, you take the town for granted, and sometimes you never notice things which other travelers might see at once. Like, for instance, churches. In ten years' time I had never noticed it—but now I did. There was no church of any kind in Lost Valley.

Anyone would say that is a small point—and it is. How many small points does it take to make a big one, I wonder? I ask myself how long it would take to lay seven miles of track, and I know it couldn't be done in a night. No, not in two nights. But then, it needn't be done in that time, not at all. Track could have been laid there for years, and all that needed to be done was perhaps a quarter of a mile from the station to just past the woods' edge out of sight. And afterwards, it could be taken up again, as easily, and stored away once more.

And in backward places like Lost Valley—little towns no one ever sees except such casual travelers like myself, and then but briefly, over night—there are all kinds of primitive survivals, I understand. Perhaps even witchcraft, or more ancient lore which has to do with human sacrifice to some dark alien God to propiti-

ate him and thus assure the earth's fertility. Nobody knows what happens in such places. But most of them, unlike Lost Valley, have at least one church.

I remembered afterward that April thirtieth was Walpurgis Eve. And everyone along the Brighton-Lost Valley line seemed to understand that on that day the train set out earlier than its scheduled time. Could they know why? Not likely. For that matter, did I? I could not say with any sureness that I did.

Where does a dream begin? Where does it end? For that matter, what about reality? That too begins and ends. Plainly, on the way back, Jem Watkins and Toby Colter, for all their chattering talk, were tired. I could not imagine Jem's goatlike capering by torch-light. Nor Toby's clumsiness either. And Mr. Darby! Who else had a voice like him? None that I knew—but then, I did not know everyone in Lost Valley. Darby and Mrs. Emerson tired, too. But he had been up late working on his accounts, and she had spent a sleepless night because of bitter tea. Or had they?

Whose dream had I been in? Mine—or theirs?

Perhaps I would never have doubted that it was a dream had it not been for that visit I paid to Beales. Even the sight of the baby clothes being folded and put away, set against that vivid memory of what had been flung in sacrifice against that silent stone thing in the woods, would not alone have given me the doubt I had. But on the way down, while Jem obligingly, as always, held his train at the stations, on the spur to Brighton, while I got out and got my orders from the local harness shops, I thought about it, and at last, getting back on the train at Hempfield for the final jog to Brighton, I spoke about Beales' baby.

"I meant to call and see Beales' baby," I began.

Jem cut me off, loquaciously. "Good thing you didn't, Mr. Wilson. That poor little thing died in the night. You'd like to've upset them."

But at Beales' it had been sleeping less than two hours ago.

Here in the sunny coach the baby in Jem's words was dead in the night. Was this, after all, the same dark train which played its part in some ancient, woodland rite? A country train—worn locomotive, coal-car, baggage car, and creaking coach, making its run once daily up to Lost Valley, and once daily back. And in the night did it always rest quietly at the station at Lost Valley? Or did it, once a year, on Walpurgis Eve, make a secret sally into darkness?

I bade the train goodbye at Brighton. I said goodbye to Jem and Toby, Abner and Sib, who shook my hand as if I had been a life-long friend. But somehow, I was never quite fully able to say goodbye to Lost Valley. It stayed just out of sight on the perimeter of consciousness, ready to reappear in the mind's eye at a moment's urging, at any casual thing that stirred memory. Like a country train on a little spur. Or masquerades and hooded things. Or city lights in the dusk . .

I heard about Lost Valley indirectly once after that.

It was at a Cambridge party—one of those gatherings which include a wide variety of people. I was passing a little group on my way to the punch-bowl, when I heard Lost Valley mentioned. I turned. I recognized the speaker: Jeffrey Kinnan, a brilliant young Harvard man, a sociologist, and I listened.

"Genetically, Lost Valley is most interesting. Apparently there has been inbreeding there for generations. We should soon find an increasing number of degenerates in that vicinity. In genetics . . ."

I walked away. Genetics, indeed! Something that was old before Mendel was a mote in the cosmos. I could have spoken, too, but how could I be sure? Was it a dream or not? Certainly, wrapped up in his genetics, Kinnan would have called it a nightmare.

Bishop's Gambit

On the sixth day of his haphazard investigation of the attic, Albert found his grandfather's board and chess-men. They were locked in a case in a locked trunk, but, being briefly alone in the house, he had no hesitation about breaking both locks. He did it with dispatch, knowing no one was likely to come up into the attic for months. Anyway, he had made the attic, with all its boxes, trunks, old furniture, and forgotten toys, his own, a sort of private world which perhaps only a child could understand and enjoy.

Albert had not been looking for the chess-set. It was just that he had been conducting a routine examination of his domain by way of taking inventory. Year after year, the attic yielded surprising and often delightful discoveries, for, as he grew older, he learned to appreciate different things. Now, being seven, the chess-set attracted him. Grandfather Josiah Valliant had been dead only three months, and Albert could remember very clearly the seemingly endless hours which he had whiled away watching the old man at his game. He took the set over to one of the gable windows into the sunlight streaming into the dust-mote atmosphere, and set it up on a little gate-legged table there.

He remembered very clearly every move his grandfather had made. First he took the white king's pawn and moved it out; it seemed to him that he could almost hear the old man's rumbling

voice explaining, "That is the bishop's gambit, Albert." The next move would come from across the board—the counter opening from the black king. Then the white king's bishop's pawn went out. He grew absorbed, casting his memory back, back to his grandfather's sunny room, seeing in his mind's eye the shawled old man, usually so gruff, but with him always patient, seeing himself sitting there, watching, fascinated, while the pieces moved under the old man's fingers, and, sometimes, at the behest of a friend come to spend a few hours with Josiah Valliant.

"Albert! Albert Valliant!"

His absorption was broken. He started up in irritation, but he had no impulse to disobey. He got out of the attic before he answered, and, brushing himself, went down the long, dark stairs to the living-room where his mother expected him to give her a report of his activities for the hours during which she had been away.

Mrs. Valliant was a vain, foolish woman, pretty in a vapid way, with China blue eyes and a small mouth which seemed incapable of any but a doll-like expression. She was blonde and much be-frilled, and she was not, at the moment, being fawned upon by the tall man with the black moustache, known to him chiefly by his mother's name of "Dear Perry." And had Albert behaved himself while she was gone?

"Yes," said Albert dutifully.

Dust on his clothes, grime on his hands—she observed, she commented. To the bathroom now, quick, to be cleaned for dinner. "And Albert," she said, "guess who's coming to have dinner with us?"

Albert grew sullen. He did not need to guess; he knew. He said nothing.

"Guess, Albert," said his mother gaily.

Silence answered her.

"My little boy must have lost his tongue," she said chidingly.

He made an indeterminate sound and marched sturdily to the bathroom.

Her voice followed him, resigned. "I don't know how you got it into your head that Perry doesn't like you! I'm sure he does. And he wants so much that you should like him. Oh, I know he doesn't pretend to think he can take your poor dead father's place—but *I* know, *I'm* positive, if Henry were alive, he'd *want* you to learn to like Perry, just as Perry likes you, and I know . . ."

He closed the bathroom door and enjoyed the beneficence of freedom from her pursuing voice, which had begun to assume that sound of complaint so familiar to him. He wished he could say, like grandfather had said, "Oh, for God's sake, Verna, stop that damned whining!" But, of course, he could not.

Finishing in the bathroom, he opened the door cautiously and peered out. Sounds from the kitchen informed him that his mother was out of range. He slipped from the bathroom and mounted once more into the attic, before the last sunlight had quite withdrawn. It lay redly against the gabled ceiling; it reflected from there with a kind of pale, old rose luminousness to the chess-board below, shrouding the figures in a glowing haze.

He stared at them. What had he done? Moved out the two pawns in the bishop's gambit, yes. Followed out with the pawn to open for the defense from the black king. Then his mother had called. And since then—why, since then someone else must have discovered his game, for there it was, well advanced, with havoc wrought among the black pieces, and the king only a few moves from being checkmated, the white pieces inexorably moving in for the final triumph. Albert stood looking at the board with unwavering eyes while the sunlight faded and drew away into a crimson afterglow in the west, and the dusk came up like magic in the attic. Who could have come here? he wondered. Who—when his

mother and he were alone in the house, though the cook had now come in, of course. But it might have been the cook, come early. No, that was not possible; she knew nothing about chess.

He went to the board and took his place at white. Even though the twilight had invaded the attic, and the cheery sounds of robins' carols came in from outside, there was enough light to complete the game. Black had two moves, white had three. He made them. Checkmate.

"My game," said Albert.

"Our game," said somebody else gently.

Albert looked around. There was no one there. There was nothing but a host of shadows which had not been there before. Evening made its own shadows awaiting night and the darkness in which all shadows were but one vastness of black without end. He stood waiting for another sound, but there was nothing. Robins caroled, farther away a meadow-lark sang, the mourning doves cooed sadly under the eaves, and from the street came the muted voices of life: children screaming in play, cars going by, the whistling of policemen directing traffic at the intersection, the clanging of the streetcar.

Resolutely, Albert re-set the board. Back went the white pieces, back went the black—back into place in even rows. Now, then—the game waited upon the next day, and would it were now, and that dinner were over, and "dear Perry" were gone away again.

He went out of the attic and descended dutifully to his room, where he waited until his mother called him for dinner.

Perry Cross was tall, urbane, handsome. He had a way with women—so everyone said, and it was certain that he would have his way with so giddy and foolish a woman as Mrs. Henry Valiant, now a year widowed and no longer protected even in theory by the influence of her father-in-law. He had dark, snapping

eyes; he had a fine black moustache; he had well-pressed clothes and a well-pressed mouth. He owned rings, a cane, bony features; he possessed patience, cunning fortitude. He was predatory, but suavely so. Women loved him; he loved women—with money; he loved them lavishly, exacting ultimate repayment. He could not possibly have loved anyone so insipid as Verna Valliant for any other reason but money, which she had.

"Good evening, Albert," he said.

"H'lo," answered Albert indifferently, appraising the table.

"Were you ever a little boy, Perry?" asked his mother. "I can't believe you were, really."

Cross said something in a low voice; his mother giggled.

Albert was disgusted. He looked at them both with the utmost distaste, spurred all the more by the unmistakable venom for him which he had not failed to notice in Cross's single direct glance.

"Children can be so difficult, can't they?" asked Mrs. Valliant, and rang for dinner service to begin, having given the cook just enough time to change into another costume. Perry Cross had once said that he appreciated a woman who knew how to save and take care of her money.

"Oh, the right training does wonders," said Cross, glancing across at Albert with a light smile on his thin lips.

Albert flinched inside.

"Albert, you haven't even told dear Perry how glad you are to see him," said his mother.

Silence.

"Albert!"

"I'm not."

"At least he's honest," said Cross, but the look he turned on Albert belied his appreciation of that honesty.

Now his mother was fluttering, all in a dither for having

prodded him until he had said something he should have left unsaid.

The food came. Consommé. A tossed salad in wooden bowls. Lamb chops. Cranberry pudding and coffee. The conversation during the meal was light, ignoring Albert. This suited him. Ever since his mother had permitted "dear Perry" such frequent access to the house—which was after grandfather Valliant's death—Albert had retreated more and more into his own world, which was select and did not include silly women or sleek men who manifestly hated children. Perry Cross existed on its perimeter. His mother was retreating to the same distance with meteoric rapidity undeterred by the knowledge that she was, after all, his mother.

After dinner Cross leaned back and surveyed Albert with judicious scrutiny.

"Do you think we ought to tell him, Verna?" he asked, without taking his eyes off Albert.

"Oh, dear! He'll have to know, won't he?" She turned to Albert. "How would you like to have dear Perry as your new father, Albert?" she asked, visibly apprehensive.

Albert was horrified. For a moment he wanted to vomit, but on reflection, the cranberry pudding had been too good. He gave Cross a stare of unmistakable contempt, pushed his chair back from the table, and stalked indignantly from the room. He went up the stairs muttering to himself. Father, indeed! His mother's shrill anger rising from below, coupled with Cross's attempts to soothe her, left him as cold as an icicle in the Antarctic.

"I wish my granddaddy was here," he said into the darkness of his room. "He'd show that Perry Cross!"

He fell asleep presently to dream dreams of Perry Cross as his new father beating and beating him, filling him full of "the right training".

In the morning his mother came querulously to his room, complaining about what a bad boy he had been the night before, and how dear Perry had had his feelings hurt, and how dear Perry only wanted him to love him . . .

"I hate him and he hates me," said Albert forthrightly.

She slapped him virtuously, but she was sorry immediately, and burst into tears. "Now see what you've done, you bad boy," she cried. "Upsetting me so much I had to hit you—my own little boy."

"You didn't have to."

"Albert!"

Sullen silence answered her.

"Albert, you must learn to like Mr. Cross."

Silence prolonged.

"Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"There now. You just try, that's all. He'll love you like he loves all the little children."

"And like he loved all his other wives," said Albert vindictively.

"Why, Albert!"

"I know. Granddaddy told me. He's been married five times before. And every time he got richer and richer. Sometimes it was the insurance, and sometimes it was just because they were fools . . ."

"Albert Valliant!"

"Like you."

She stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth and looked at him, wide-eyed. He gazed unwinkingly back at her, his small mouth and chin set and firm. "You are a bad, bad boy," she said at last, through her handkerchief, so that it had a distant, half-

strangled sound. But she retreated before his burgeoning anger.

After he got up and had his breakfast, he went outside. But he was not satisfied there; so in a little while, he made his way back up to the attic, half expecting to find another marvelous change in the pieces on the chess-board. However, they were not altered; they stood just as he had left them, and he sat down to them with a feeling of relief. Relief was an integral part of being in the attic, for here he was away from every troublesome thing—he did not have to think of Perry Cross or school beginning again in less than a month, or now, of his mother's impending marriage—nothing. This was his world—the sloping walls, the dark room filled with enchanting perfumes and pungences, the two gable windows looking out over all the city, for the Valliant house stood on a little knoll, and from one of its gables at least it was possible to see the ocean and sometimes ships on that blue water, and gulls flying like something fantastic and unreal in a world as distant as a star.

He sat down at the chess-board.

No sooner was he there than he was seized, as before, with the urge to play. He pushed the king's pawn to fourth place. That was the way to begin; that was grandfather Valliant's way. Bishop's gambit. He reached over and brought up the black king's pawn to sit glowering at the white pawn, face to face across the middle of the board. He came back and brought forth the sacrifice—his king's bishop's pawn to fourth place. He tried to imagine what black ought to do. What if, unlike Grandfather Valliant's game, black did not accept the challenge? What then? But black had to accept or lose his own pawn, of course. But indeed—was it necessary to take the black pawn or the white, for that matter?

He stretched out his hand to move, and held it there in mid-air above the board.

The black pawn stood in place of his bishop's pawn, and his pawn, instead, lay over at the side of the board. He withdrew his hand, thoughtfully.

"But *I* didn't do it," he said aloud.

"No, of course not."

Ah, but he knew that voice. "Where are you, Grandpa?"

"Play, boy."

He looked in vain for that kindly, bearded face with the eyes that could be so fierce and challenging. Once he thought he saw it opposite him, across the chess-board; again it seemed to be at his shoulder, peering intently at the board. It was strange, and yet it was not strange. Bending to play, he found that each time he made the wrong move, something held his hand and guided him to the right move. What fun it was! Almost like old times in grandfather's room, before Perry Cross had moved into his mother's life with such force and determination.

Even in the midst of his game—though his fourth that afternoon—Cross obtruded, and presently he found himself telling Grandfather Valliant all about it; for, though he could never seem to see anything of the old man except a shadowy something from time to time, he could hear those subdued grunts and har-rumphs which Grandfather Valliant always gave when he was listening to him.

"And so if he is going to be my new dad, he's going to beat me, he's going to whip me," said Albert earnestly. "I know it the way he looks at me, and there won't be anything mama can do to stop him, either, unless she gives him all her money."

"Humph!"

"I wish you were here all the time, Grandpa; then he wouldn't come every night like this. And I could stay with you if he took mama away."

"Humph!"

It was not a very satisfactory conversation, but at least Albert had someone who listened to him without interruption, and, unlike his mother, without fidgeting and tears and recriminations.

In the evening he was scolded for having been in the attic again.

His mother was almost incoherent. He mustn't go there again, but if he did, he must wear old clothes and he mustn't get so dirty; good little boys didn't get dirty. He must learn to like "dear Perry" because "dear Perry" was going to be his stepfather and that meant he must be just like a son to him. Would he promise?

"Promise what?"

"Will you promise to like Perry?"

No answer.

"Will you try?"

No answer.

"Albert, for the last time, will you promise to try to like Perry somehow?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Yes, what?"

"I promise to try to like him somehow."

"And keep out of the attic. You look like a tramp."

"But right now," he amended, "I hate Perry Cross."

"Oh, you bad boy!"

There were further tears, more recriminations, in the midst of which Perry Cross came, bearing flowers—some roses he had bought at the florist's down the street. However distraught she was, Mrs. Valliant cooed and fluttered. And whatever was the matter with her? demanded Perry Cross. He had never seen her eyes so red. Surely not with tears!

"Oh, it's that naughty little boy of mine," she cried. "He won't stay out of the attic. Every afternoon—lunch till supper—there he is, dirty as a—tramp! I can't make him obey!"

Cross laughed. From his vantage-point on the stairs, Albert shuddered.

"Some day perhaps you might let me try, darling," said Cross.

"Oh, would you? I mean, do you think you could?"

"Perhaps he has something up there he doesn't want anyone else to see. We might surprise him."

"Oh, Perry, you *are* clever."

Albert crept up the stairs. He remembered as if it were yesterday his grandfather saying kindly, "Albert, your mother isn't very smart; but she's very sweet and she *is* your mother, and after I'm gone you'll have to watch over her." He flung himself on to his bed and buried his head in the pillow, sobbing. "I can't do anything," he said in miserable impotence. "I'm too little and he's too big!"

In the next four days Albert played seventeen games of chess. Though he was not aware of it, he used Alekhine's opening and the queen's gambit; he played against Philidor's and the Indian defense; he opened with Ruy Lopez and Reti's; but the bishop's gambit remained his favorite; he felt less strange with it, having been so long accustomed to his grandfather's preference.

He had long and pleasant conversations (if very much one-sided), with his grandfather, and he felt somehow safe in the dusty confines of the attic.

Yet he was aware that Perry Cross and his mother discussed him; he was aware of this as of impending doom, and he expected at any moment that Cross would prevail upon her to let him try his hand with Albert. Still, he believed intuitively that Cross would wait until his mother was securely in his grasp before he tried.

The week passed, and another began.

Late one sunny August afternoon, a board creaked knowingly behind Albert at his game. He turned, his intimate conversation halted abruptly.

Cross stood there, eyeing him speculatively. "Talking to yourself, Albert?"

No answer.

Cross moved forward, peering over Albert's thin shoulders. "Ah, chess. Imagine that! Can you play?"

Silence.

"But, of course, you can, or you wouldn't be at it—would you?"

He moved around the gate-legged table and sat down on a box on the other side, his back to the window. The box, being small, gave him a hunched appearance; with the light streaming in at his back, he looked malevolent.

Albert was caught in a shell of danger, sensing it all around him. He pushed his chin out, stubbornly, and sat with his small hands clenched.

"Did my mother send you up here?" he demanded.

"She knows I'm here, Albert."

"I don't believe you."

In a flash, Cross's hand whipped across the table and fell, knuckles forward, upon one cheek. Albert drew back, his fingers instinctively reaching for the stinging place.

"You should be careful when you suggest people are lying, Albert. That isn't nice." He smiled, but his eyes did not smile. "You and I will have to get to know each other better, Albert."

"I know you," said Albert thickly. There were tears in his throat, but he was too proud to let them show. "I know you more than I want to know you," he said fiercely. "You can just get out of here. This is my place. Mine—and grandpa's."

"Oh, there is someone else with you?" Cross made a pretense,

much exaggerated, of peering about the attic, but his eyes returned to Albert, and from Albert, swung down to the board, which he studied.

"Let us begin with a game of chess, Albert," he said finally. Without waiting for Albert's acquiescence, he began to re-set the board. "I play a little, too. In a way, Albert, I am a master—at least of pawns, if not of chess."

"Of women," said Albert.

Cross looked sharply, angrily at him, but decided that the boy did not know what he had said. Nor did Albert; he had not meant to say it; he had not even thought it at the moment; something inside him had impelled the words from his lips. He felt strange even at the sound of them, for he had wanted to say that no, he would not play chess with Cross, and even now he wanted to withdraw, but something held him, something would not let him go.

"Shall we play?" asked Cross levelly, but his voice was a challenge.

"Yes," said Albert, but "No" rattled in his bewildered brain. And, "For what stakes?" he asked. This also came from no part of him.

Cross gave him a long, studied gaze. "Well," he said at last. "Well, well, Albert—somebody has been teaching you things. Only seven, too. But since you suggest it, I'll take you up. If you lose, you must forget that you don't like me, and if I lose, you may continue to dislike me for a while."

"No," said Albert with a mocking sound of contempt alien even to him. "I'll play for your life or mine." What am I saying? he thought despairingly, crying out inside of him to Grandfather Valliant.

Cross clucked and chuckled. "That is to say, we shall agree that if you lose, I am to do whatever I like with you, and if I lose, you

shall do what you like with my life? Is that the stake, Albert?"

"Yes." The desperate "No" remained locked within him.

"Very well. Open, Albert," commanded Cross.

Albert leaned over the board, bewildered and frightened still. He moved the king's pawn forward.

"Ah, bishop's gambit, eh? Relatively common." Out came the expected counter.

Black to white, the pawns looked across the middle of the board, as over them looked Cross to Albert.

Albert moved once again, the only move he knew; he moved in an agony of apprehension—would Cross accept the challenge?

Leisurely, Cross captured the white bishop's pawn.

Now, suddenly, Albert's apprehension fell away, and, raising his hand to make his third move, he knew that the power which played his game was not his own. And, looking at his hand, as at something strange, it seemed to him that he could see over it, enclosing it, as it were, the gnarled old hand, broad with spatulate fingers, of his Grandfather Valliant.

The game went on, the battle raging to and fro across the board.

But inexorably, inexplicably to Cross, the advantage went steadily to Albert. Cross's first confidence shook, then faded. What was happening was beyond his understanding—that a child could master his game with so simple an opening as the bishop's gambit! But it was taking place despite his most studied moves, and slowly, surely, he was being mated, and as inevitably at last, Albert made his final move.

"Checkmate!" he cried.

Furious, Cross swept the chessmen from the table. The board came flying after. With another blow, he knocked the gatelegged table out of the way. He stood towering over Albert, crouching unmoved before him.

"So—you won, Albert. And what do you suppose you would do with my life even if you could command it?"

"I'd throw it away," said Albert stoutly.

Something leaned down over Albert, something that was tall and dark as a cloud, something with great, gnarled hands like Grandfather Valliant's, something that picked Cross up as if he were a toy and flung him through the window, shattering the glass, out and up to plummet down three stories and more to the slope of the back yard below. He fell with an awful sound directly into the alley.

At the precinct station, Captain Molloy called Squad Car Seven.

"Kelly, run out to one-eleven Whitney. A junkman just reported a dead or injured man in the alley there. While you're about it, send Jackson in to make some inquiries of a Mrs. Valliant at that address. That fellow Cross has been seen there. We've got the autopsy on his fourth wife. Unmistakable trace of arsenic. Pick him up if he's there. That's all."

Albert stopped only to set up the chessmen once more.

"I'll be back tomorrow, Grandpa," he said.

He descended to the upper floor. He went on down to the lower floor.

His mother was peering curiously and apprehensively out of the kitchen window, murmuring about the crowd out there. What could have happened?

"Mother?"

She turned. "Oh, you've been in the attic again . . ."

"I promised about Mr. Cross," he said with intent purpose. "The way he is now, I like him."

Mrs. Manifold

I don't know whether I would have gone into the *Sailors' Rest* if I had seen its proprietress before I saw the grimy card with its scrawled "Clerk Wanted" in the window. But perhaps I would—a man with less than a shilling in his pocket, and little chance to add to that, can't hesitate too much. Still, there was something about Mrs. Manifold, something you could feel but hardly put into words. I never saw anyone so fat; though she was a short woman, she weighed over three hundred pounds, and it was easy to understand why she preferred to keep to her own room on the fourth floor—a gable room.

"Ever been a clerk before, Mr. Robinson?" she asked me.

Her voice was thin, high, almost piping; it was a small voice for so big a woman, and because it was so shrill and penetrating, the contrast was the more startling.

"No. But I can read and write; I can add figures, if it comes to that," I said.

She gave me a sharp glance. "It's plain to see you've had some schooling. Down on your luck, is it?"

I admitted that.

She sat looking at me, humming a queer little tune, which I came to recognize later when she sang it: a sea-chanty. In all that tremendous bulk, only her eyes seemed to move: small, black, with short-lashed eyelids; there was no evidence that she breathed,

no tremor disturbed her flesh, clad in a dress of black satin, which, despite her great mass, was frilled and ruffled like a child's frock and looked almost obscene. Her eyes scrutinized me with a kind of bold furtiveness, her fat fingers resting on the arms of the chair which contained her strangely motionless body. There was something horrible, not in a bestial sense, but in a spiritual way, about her—not in any one facet, but in everything—something that suggested terror and cold grue.

"My clientele," she said in a voice suddenly subdued, but with a crafty smile, "might not always be a nice one, Mr. Robinson. A rough lot, Mr. Robinson. You wouldn't expect anything else of Wapping, now, would you? Or of somebody like Mrs. Ambrose Manifold?"

Then she tittered. A faint ripple disturbed that vast bulk, and the effect was wholly horrible.

"I can hold my own," I said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps. We shall see, Mr. Robinson. Your duties will be simple. You know what an inn-keeper's clerk must do. Make them sign the register, Mr. Robinson. Sometimes they have reason to avoid it. Once a week, you will bring the register up to me. I wish to examine it. The money will be deposited to my account at the Bridesley Bank whenever and as soon as it collects to fifty pounds. I am not at home to anyone. Begin now."

Thereupon she rang a little bell, and the old man who had conducted me up the stairs led the way back down, having been instructed by Mrs. Manifold that I was to begin my duties at once.

I lost no time acquainting myself with my surroundings. While the old man, whose name was Mr. Claitor, removed the sign from the window and put it carefully away, with an air of doubtless needing it soon again, I took a look at the registry. It was nothing but an old ledger, on the first page of which someone had written

in a flowing hand, "*Sailors' Rest*—Registry." There were two floors of rooms, which someone's fancy had numbered, to make seven in all—four on the second, three on the third; the first floor being given over to the kitchen, the small lobby, and three closet-like rooms for the staff. One of these was occupied by Mr. Claitor, another by Mr. and Mrs. Jeffers, and the third by the clerk of *Sailors' Rest*. Six of the rooms were occupied at four shillings the night, six for day and night; evidently there were no rates by the week. The lobby had an appearance of genteel shabbiness; it was not exactly dirty, but it was certainly not clean, and it conveyed the impression of never having been quite clean within the memory of any living person. The glass in the window and the door facing the street was fly-specked and dust-streaked, and there was about the entire building a faint but unmistakable odor of the river. The Thames flowed not far away, and at night its musk, rising with the fog, enclosed and permeated the old building.

Mr. Claitor, who was tall, thin, and grey, with the lugubrious expression of a very tired Great Dane, got around to instructing me, finally, that the lobby was to be closed promptly at nine o'clock every night, though, thereafter, I might expect to be summoned to open the door for one or more of our tenants come roistering home.

Probably there is nothing so tiring as the position as clerk in a shabby, hole-in-a-corner inn, which seems designed to attract only the dregs of mankind: the bitter, disillusioned old men of the sea—the hopeless wanderers haunting Limehouse and Whitechapel and Wapping—the hunted and the haunted and the lost. Yet, I suppose everyone in a position not especially to his liking is similarly convinced; the human being is essentially weak and insecure, no matter what his place in life, and if that place is not

felicitous, that weakness makes itself manifest in dissatisfaction, out of which grows the conviction that anything at all is better than the present position. Work at the *Sailors' Rest* was monotonous, even when there were books to be read—which was not often, and it soon became a pattern.

But the weekly trip to Mrs. Manifold's gable room was somehow never quite part of that pattern. There was something a little different every time, despite the fact that her position never seemed to have changed; for all her appearance, she need never have moved from one week to the next, and not at all since first I saw her. Every time she would take the registry and examine the new entries.

"Roald Jensen," she read out slowly. "Now, what is he like? Is he a tall man or is he short?"

"Tall, thin, sandy-red hair, one wooden leg. He wears a moustache. Last sailed on the *Lofoten* out of Oslo."

"Frederick Schwartz, then. What is he like?"

"Short, fat. Looks like a German Burgomeister. Red cheeks, blue eyes. Very talkative. Heavy German accent. Last sailed on the *Stresemann* out of Hamburg."

"Good gracious, Mr. Robinson," she said on occasion, "you should have been a policeman. I admire the quality of observation."

But, each time she said it, I caught the unmistakable impression that she was laughing at me behind her small, dark eyes; and each time she finished her examination of the registry, I could not escape the conviction that she did so with relief, so that I wondered often why she insisted on taking this trouble at all if she concluded it always with such manifest satisfaction at being done with it.

Once, she was talkative. She said comparatively little, but I learned from her that she had had some kind of place in Singa-

pore half a dozen years ago or thereabouts; she and her husband had run it. Then she had come to England.

"And where is Mr. Manifold now?" I asked her.

"Ah, nobody knows, nobody knows. Nobody, Mr. Robinson."

Thereafter she had given the unmistakable sign of having finished with me—closing her eyes and leaning back, inert, save for a trembling of her thick lips, as she hummed the chanty she sometimes sang.

*Oh, the Captain's in the brig, Lads,
The First Mate's brains are blown;
We'll sail the Seven Seas, Lads,
And make them all our own . . .*

But there were diversions, though they were out of the ordinary.

Sometimes gentlemen from the C. I. D. at Scotland Yard came around to look for somebody—on the average, once a fortnight. Sometimes one of our registrants walked out and never came back, leaving all his baggage behind to be stored against his return—which might not happen. Things could happen in the fog; things could take place no one ever found out—robbery and sudden death, suicide sometimes. I never felt any inclination to go outside on a foggy night; daytime was dreary enough, for the *Sailors' Rest* was not in a good neighborhood—oh, good enough for what it was, I suppose, but not good enough for what it might have been. And there was something about Mrs. Manifold, too, that seemed to say she had known better days and a better business than this, even if in Singapore.

Singapore! Perhaps it had its holes like *Sailors' Rest*, its districts like Wapping, too—but, being far away, it was caught in a kind of magic aura, it took on color and life and drama built up solely in imagination, as of all far-away places which are never, somehow, quite real, and always, always wonderfully exciting.

Why had Mrs. Manifold left Singapore to come to London? And why had she come down into Wapping, of all places? But here she was, and apparently content to be here, making no complaint, occasionally even making sly remarks about her reduced station in life. Yet she need not have been here, for her balance at the bank was always written in five figures—in ready funds alone, she was worth more than fifty thousand pounds.

But for all the signs of breeding which showed through, there was never anything which could dispel that feeling of terror she could induce. Did it arise out of her shocking obesity, or from some other, hidden source? All too often revulsion stimulates dislike and hatred; it is impossible sometimes to uncover the roots of fear or horror. Curiously, she had but one taboo, about which I heard from Mr. Claitor, when he came to my room one night.

"Mrs. Manifold says you are not to drink wine, Mr. Robinson. No wine in the house, she says. It's the rule of *Sailors' Rest*."

When I mentioned it to her, she confirmed it. "Wine I cannot abide, Mr. Robinson. Ale, yes. Whiskey, yes. Gin, if you like. Vermouth, certainly. Whatever you wish—but no wine."

She occupied her gable in lordly splendor. Splendor being relative, her self-denial did not diminish it. She ruled *Sailors' Rest* with an unchallenged and indomitable will. In a sense, she was *Sailors' Rest*, and *Sailors' Rest* was Mrs. Manifold; sometimes at night, in that borderland between sleep and waking, I thought of the old building as somehow alive, squatting obscenely in its row of ancient buildings, with small black window-eyes, like Mrs. Manifold's, and straight black hair, parted in the middle and drawn around back over invisible ears, and gold hoops for rings; I thought of the wide, fly-specked, dust-streaked window in front expanding briefly, fleetingly into a sly-lipped smile, something

akin to a leer. Like the fog and the musk of the Thames, Mrs. Manifold's presence permeated the very walls, made itself felt in every nook and cranny, and lingered in the quiet air.

In the middle of my eleventh week, early one hot summer night, there came an old sailor just in on *H. M. S. Malaya*, out of Singapore. A Yankee, by the look of him, with a brush of short beard reaching around his chin from one ear to another: a Quaker cut, I think they call it. He was in his sixties, I judged, and did not like the look of the place, saying so, and adding that there was no other.

"I'll stay the night," he said.

"American?" I asked.

"Born there. Spent most of my life in Singapore."

Perhaps it was natural that I should ask whether he had ever heard of Mrs. Ambrose Manifold. There was nothing to show that he was within shouting distance of her.

"Mrs. Manifold," he said, and grinned. "Mister, there was a woman. Big enough for half a dozen women. Never been as good a fancy house in Singapore since she lit out for parts unknown."

"Why did she leave?"

"Who knows? Women don't do things sensible, Mister. She was making money faster'n they could spend it. Then Amby run out on her, and she closed up her place, and off she went. Biggest thing I ever seen to drop out of sight like that!"

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"Nobody knows that, Mister. They didn't get along too well sometimes. Amby liked to drink—but he was a wine-drinker—in Singapore! He could get sick stewed on wine faster'n you could say Jack Robinson. Your name ain't Jack, is it?"

"No," I said. "It doesn't matter."

"Well, Amby run out on her, though how he did it, God knows. And he took along the biggest cask of wine they had in the cellar. The way she watched him and all, he was sly and fast to get out—and with that wine, too! Nobody ever saw him go—but the cask of wine he had hauled out bold as brass! He had his mind made up, Mister—and so would you, if you ever saw Mrs. Manifold. What could a man do with a woman as fat as that, eh, Mister?"

He poked me in the ribs and said that he was tired.

In the morning he was gone, but he had paid in advance; so it was his privilege to go when he liked. It was necessary to get one-night payment in advance to guard against this method of departure.

And that weekend, when Mrs. Manifold came upon his name, her eyes held to it, and she began to tremble—a strange sight, like the shaking of jelly, a shuddering and trembling that was unpleasant to behold.

"Joshua Bennington. Mr. Robinson—a well-built man with a brown beard, was he? From Singapore. One night, too! In mid-week. Ah, too bad, too bad! Why didn't you let me know?"

"I had no idea you would want to know before now. I have my instructions."

"Yes, yes—that's true. Singapore! I would have liked to talk to him."

She said no more, but there was a strange expression in her eyes. I could not fathom it. Triumph, amusement, regret—all these were there—or were they only reflections from my own imagination? It was difficult to tell with Mrs. Manifold. But the trembling in her body continued for a long time, and I was anxious to get away, to get out of that gable room, to escape the burden of her eyes.

Three days after that, something changed in that old inn.

The change was in Mrs. Manifold, too, and it happened after the empty seventh room was filled. He came in just before closing time, a small man with a limp, with his hat pulled down low, and his face all muffled up against the fog which was so thick it had got into the lobby and was yellow in the light at the desk. He was wet with it, wet with fog—and inside wet—with wine. For he reeked of it—stronger than the room reeked of the fog and the river's smell; the sickish smell of sweet wine hung about him like a cloud.

A strange man and a silent one.

"Good evening, sir," I said.

No answer.

I turned the registry toward him, holding out the pen. "Number Seven left, sir," I said. "Will it be for the night or longer?"

What he said sounded like, "Longer," but his voice was so muffled I could not easily tell.

"A wet night, sir," I said.

He signed the registry in a crabbed hand, writing with difficulty, and without removing his tattered gloves.

"Third floor back, last door. It's standing open," I said.

Without a word he left the lobby for the stairs, trailing that nauseating smell of wine.

I looked at the registry.

The writing was difficult, but it could be read, after a fashion. Unless the fog and the addling sweetness of the wine-smell and my imagination deceived me, I read there, "Amb. Manifold, late of Singapore, out of Madeira."

I took the registry and mounted to the fourth floor. The crack under the door showed a light, still. I knocked.

"It's Robinson, Mrs. Manifold," I said. "You told me if we ever got anybody else from Singapore . . ."

"Come in."

I went in. She was still sitting there in her black satin dress, like a queen in the middle of the room.

"Let me see," she said eagerly.

I put the registry before her.

And then she saw. Her dark-skinned face went pale, and if she had trembled before, she shook now—a great, obscene shaking animating that mass of flesh. She pushed the book away, and it fell to the floor. I bent and picked it up.

"Seems to be the same name as your own," I said.

With some effort at control, she asked the familiar question. "What is he like?"

"Short—a small man—with a limp."

"Where is he?"

"In number seven—just under you."

"I want to see him."

"Now?"

"Now, Mr. Robinson."

I went down the stairs and knocked on the door of number seven. No answer. I knocked louder. Still no answer. A surly, unpleasant man, certainly. I knocked once more. Still no answer.

I tried the door. It was open.

I pushed it ajar and said softly into the darkness, "Mr. Manifold?"

No answer.

I opened the door all the way and turned up the light.

The room was empty. Empty, that is, of human occupation—it was alive with the rich headiness of wine, a sickening sweetness, cloying and repelling. There was no sign that the bed had been touched; yet the door of the room was closed, where it had been open before; so he had been there, since no one else had.

I went downstairs into the lobby, but no one was there, and the outer door was locked, as I had left it. Mr. Manifold was nowhere to be seen.

I went back to the gable room where Mrs. Manifold waited.

"Well?" she asked, seeing me alone.

"I can't find him," I said. "I tried his room, but he's gone."

She was still shaking, but in the midst of her inner turmoil, she asked, "Mr. Robinson, have you been drinking wine?"

"No. That smell came in with him. He's been drinking, I suspect. Madeira, I think—or something equally heavy. A sweet port . . ."

But she was not listening. Or rather, she was not listening to me. Her little eyes had narrowed, and she was leaning a little to one side, with her massive head on her great shoulders cocked somewhat to the left and down, as if she were listening to something from below.

"Do you hear someone singing, Mr. Robinson?" she asked in a harsh whisper.

"Can't say as I do," I answered, after a moment of listening.

"It goes like this," she said, and sang with horrible urgency the familiar lines of her own chanty—

*"Oh, the Captain's in the brig, Lads,
The First Mate's brains are blown;
We'll sail the Seven Seas, Lads,
And make them all our own . . ."*

"No," I said.

She closed her eyes and leaned back. "Let me know when you see him again, Mr. Robinson."

After that, Mrs. Manifold's bell rang several times a day for me.

First it was, "Get that smell of wine out of this house, Mr. Robinson."

But I couldn't. Open doors and windows as I would, I couldn't get that smell of wine out: there it was—rich, heady, nauseating; it had come in to stay, and there was nothing to do but live with in. I could imagine how it bothered her, what with her hatred for the stuff, but it was in her room, too, and she had to endure it as well as the rest of us.

Then, afterward, it was about Mr. Manifold. Had I seen him?

No, I had not. I never saw him again. He had gone without paying, but then, he never rightly used that room except to put the smell of wine into it, and there was no charge for that.

And did I hear that singing?

I never did.

But she did, and it bothered her. And it bothered her, too, to hear Mr. Manifold the way she said she did. She knew his walk; there was a slight drag because of that limp. I never heard anything like that, and neither did anyone else, for she did ask Mr. Claitor, who had not even seen Mr. Manifold, as I had.

I used to ask myself, if he were indeed her husband, why had he come? And, having come, why had he gone without so much as saying hello or goodbye to his wife? It was strange—but *Sailors' Rest* was a place for strange things to happen even in the ordinary course of its monotonous existence.

Mrs. Manifold was not the same.

If anything, she was more terrible. There was a greater furtiveness about her; there was less sly humor, almost nothing of humor at all; there was an unmistakable grimness, a kind of terrible bravado; and there was above everything else something about her that made her far more horrible than she had ever seemed to me—something that made me think of death and fear

of death, of violence and unimaginable horror, something eldritch and ineffably terrible, something that throbbed in the core of Mrs. Manifold as the red blood coursed through the heart keeping life in that bulging mound of flesh.

And being with her even for the little whiles I had to be there was infinitely unpleasant, for she was always listening, catching her breath and listening, and hearing things when there was nothing to hear. And she was always asking questions I couldn't answer to please her, and scolding at me to clear the air of that wine smell, which was impossible—but I needn't ever have told her for all the impression it made on her. And she went on, sometimes, about her husband.

"Always the wine and never tending to business, that was Ambrose," she said. "And the women, too. Never could leave the fancies alone. I gave him wine—more than he could drink, damn his black soul!"

I heard that over and over. If I heard it once, I heard it a score of times. It was better than that terrible listening. You can't imagine what it is until you go through such a thing by yourself. Even today, long after my short tenure at *Sailors' Rest*, I can see that horrible, obese woman with her flesh lapping out over the sides of her chair, pushing out between the slats, leaning that vast bulk over to listen with her black-haired head and the golden hooped ear-rings glistening in the feeble yellow light that was in the room, to listen for the sound of singing and the dragging limp; I can still hear her shrill, piping voice complain about the stench of wine, the nauseating sweetness of that cloying odor brought into the *Sailors' Rest* on that fateful night of fog.

And then, one night, the end came.

I woke out of my sleep, and that wine-smell was thick enough

to choke me. I got up and opened the door of my room, and then I heard the singing—something like she said, only a little different, and it went like this—

*"Oh, the Old Man's in the Deep, Lads,
The Madam's packed and flown—
I'll sail the Seven Seas, Lads,
Until I find her home . . ."*

It was coming from somewhere upstairs; so I went back and put something on. I came out again and started up the stairs, and I thought I could hear that dragging walk Mrs. Manifold always said she heard, but I could not be sure.

I got up to the third flight of stairs when I heard her scream. It was Mrs. Manifold's voice, shrill and awful, and she was screaming at her husband.

"Go away, Ambrose! Go back!" she cried in that horrible, piping voice that came so unnaturally from her obese body. "Don't touch me!"

And then there was just a terrible, unnatural scream, diminishing into a choking, gurgling sound.

I was struck motionless with fright until Claitor came up behind me, agitated and scared; then I pulled myself together and ran up to the fourth floor. Claitor was right behind me, which turned out to be the best thing for me, since he could testify later on, and there was nothing the people at Scotland Yard could do to me.

Because Mrs. Manifold was dead—choked to death. She lay there on the floor, with her black satin dress ripped down one side, and her white flesh pushing out from the tear, and her eyes turned up. All over the room there was a smell of sweet wine so thick that it seemed there was no air left—only that sickening smell.

And there was something else—something that shouldn't have been, something nobody could explain.

There were bones scattered in the room, human bones, a man's bones— and sharp, deep marks in Mrs. Manifold's neck where she had been choked, and pieces of cloth and a battered old hat I had seen once before on a night when the fog was yellow in the light at the desk of the *Sailors' Rest* . . .

There was nothing Scotland Yard could say to explain all that.

But then, there was no reason why they should think of any connection between what happened up there in that gable room where Mrs. Manifold was hiding and what they found up the Thames from its mouth, far up, in Wapping. An old wine-cask out of Singapore, a cask that had once held Madeira and now was stove in at one end, and held nothing but the bones of two toes and a finger—nothing to tell them that Mrs. Manifold had killed her husband and put his body in that cask of wine and had it carried far out to sea, weighted perhaps, to sink until time and the tide carried it far from Singapore,—just as whatever it was came into the *Sailors' Rest* that foggy night put it down in the registry—

"Amb. Manifold, late of Singapore, out of Madeira."

Or was it somebody's ghoulish sense of humor? Out of Madeira indeed! I cannot abide the smell of it to this day!

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